Performing In-Difference E-Interview

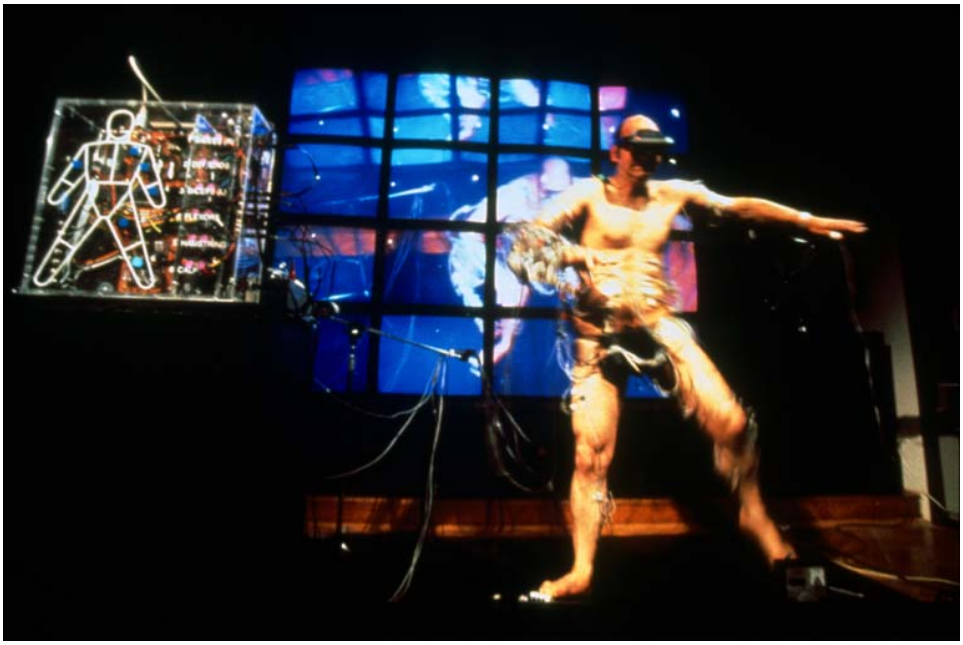
Stelarc talks to **Edward Scheer**

Edward Scheer: *In part 10 of your manifesto, Parasite Visions, you point out the lack of physicality available to internet users and invoke the future of cybernetic corporeality with a combination of high-end equipment and the ageless figure of the phantom: 'As we hard-wire more high-fidelity image, sound, tactile and force-feedback sensation between bodies, then we begin to generate powerful phantom presences—not phantom as in 'phantasmagorical', but phantom as in 'phantom limb sensation'. The sensation of the remote body sucked onto your skin and nerve endings, collapsing the psychological and spatial distance between bodies on the Net. Just as in the experience of a Phantom Limb with the amputee, bodies will generate phantom partners, not because of a lack, but as extending and enhancing addition to their physiology. Your aura will not be your own.'*

The 'collapsing' of the 'distance between bodies on the Net' recalls the idea that elsewhere you've called 'intimacy without proximity'. Might this be a solution to the very loss of interpersonal intimacy that some argue is a feature of the information age?

Stelarc: Well, with the internet it's not so much a case of a lack of physicality at all, but an alternate kind of operational system which connects physical bodies and machines with physical bodies in other places. The reference to the phantom is therefore to that which can be generated by more haptic internet interfaces that will also include tactile and force feedback. The cybernetic corporeality that is being suggested is an extended and extruded embodiment that connects a multiplicity of remote bodies, spatially separated, but electronically connected.

It's not so much that interpersonal intimacy is lost in the process, but rather that technology exposes a multiplicity of interconnections and undermines the conventional idea of intimacy between bodies in proximity. It allows alternate strategies for intimacy which might result in unexpected and multiple possibilities for new kinds of connections between bodies. The metaphor of the amputee might be misleading in that technology does not only replace what is missing from the body, but rather it constructs unexpected operational architectures. The body is not about lack, but rather about excess. It always has been. (Even the biological body alone performs with redundancy.) We are all prosthetic bodies with additional circuitry that allows us to perform beyond the boundaries of our skins and beyond the local space we inhabit. Operating in electronic space and electronic architectures, the body has spatially extended, telematically scaled loops of interaction....



SPLIT BODY: VOLTAGE-IN/ VOLTAGE-OUT
Galerija Kapelica
Ljubljana, 1996
Photograph: Igor Andjelic
STELARC

ES: *How do you see the function of performance art?*

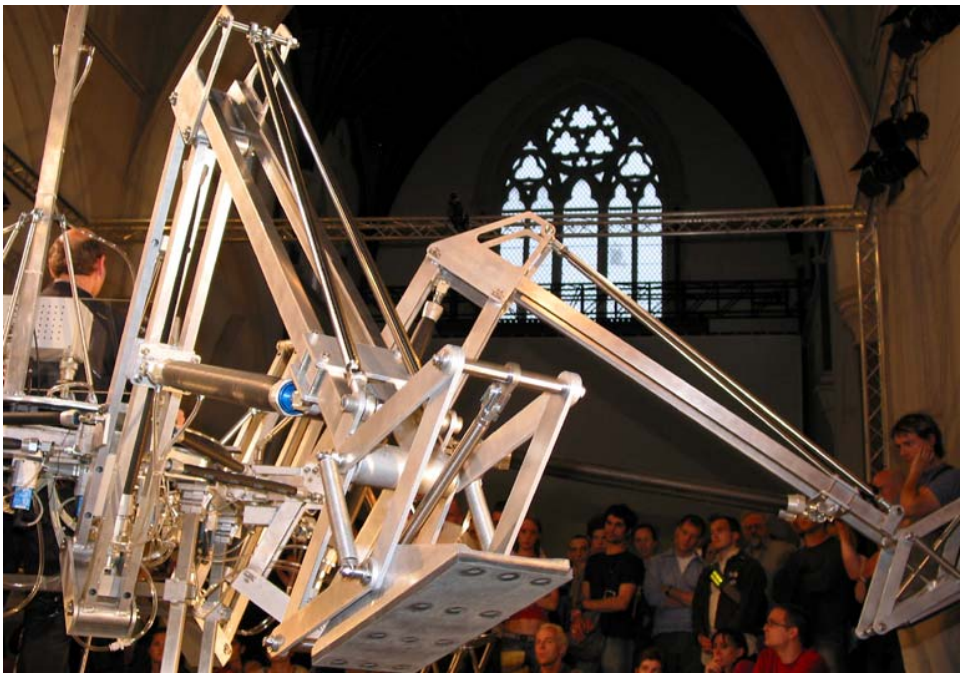
S: Suggesting that Performance Art has a function characterises it in a peculiarly utilitarian way. I'd like to imagine that most interesting art forms resist that kind of bounding. Performance Art—and as more recently seen in the Body Modification community—might be considered as an attempt to affirm the physicality of the body in an increasingly video, virtual and vicarious world. On the other hand, it can be seen as the constructing and experiencing of alternate interfaces that mesh meat with metal and machines. It's in this interaction that a cyborg system is constructed. I guess there is an oscillation of concern between these issues—and perhaps it can be even perceived as a kind of Hegelian dynamic that leads to an alternate construct….

ES: *What status do you think live art has in the information age?*

S: Live Art, rather than asserting the primacy of the body, exposes its physical presence as problematic and explores alternate and interactive interfaces. Not only interfaces to machines and other bodies, but also explores Mixed Realities (operational strategies of actual and virtual interfaces). Contemporary music and dance has embraced the possibilities of performing with new technologies. The issue is not one of embodiment versus information, but rather the diversification of the body's form and functions, of alternate kinds of embodiment, of exploring the ambivalence, uncertainties and anxieties of new hybrid structures. And, of

course, both what is considered ‘art’ and what is considered ‘live’ is always being questioned....

ES: *Going back to the* Movatar *performance of 2000 in which your body, connected through the Motion Prosthesis, was animated by, and in turn influenced, the behaviour of the avatar. How would you describe the relationship between your body and the avatar (movatar) in this piece?*



MUSCLE MACHINE
Gallery 291
London, 2003
Digital Research Unit/ Engineering Department, Nottingham Trent University
Photograph: Mark Bennett

S: The title, *Movatar*, refers to the whole interactive system including the body, the motion prosthesis and the avatar. The avatar, connected to the motion prosthesis, was animating the upper body. Not the body animating the avatar. The body through the ring of sensors on the floor could somewhat modulate the avatar’s behaviour. But the performance was premised upon the avatar initiating the action.

The interest with *Movatar* was in constructing an inverse motion capture system, where a virtual entity (avatar) might be able to function in the world with a surrogate physical body. Sure, this would be problematic, but quite possible, well within the realm of the plausible. This would construct a body, not with prosthetic bits attached or implanted, but rather the body itself becomes a prosthesis. The body is powered by a phantom and becomes a host for an artificial agency,

splitting its operational physiology—its upper body avatar actuated, its lower body able to perform with its own agency. The human body in the *Movatar* system is simultaneously a possessed and performing body. If any interesting and consequently appropriate behaviour eventuates, it's the result of the interactive system, rather than in the intelligence of the body or in the cleverness of the code of the virtual entity....

ES: *We are examining, among other things, your provocation 'We have always been prosthetic bodies, augmented and extended'. (1999) If this means we are now in a cybernetic age, what, according to your observations, has been the response from the arts in terms of the characterisation and representation of 'human' motivation and emotion? Is it still meaningful to talk about a kind of media-human dichotomy in performance?*

S: Well, I don't like to talk in generalizations about the arts—if I've understood what you're asking. I guess it's not meaningful for me to have concerns about human motivation and emotion. In fact, to be able to realise the performances I've done has meant doing them with what I would call a certain acute indifference. *Indifference*—meaning ‘being open to possibilities’—as opposed to *expectation*—that which generates closure and predictability. Performing with indifference allows the action to unfold without narrative. It happens with its own momentum generated by the interfaces and machines coupled to the body.

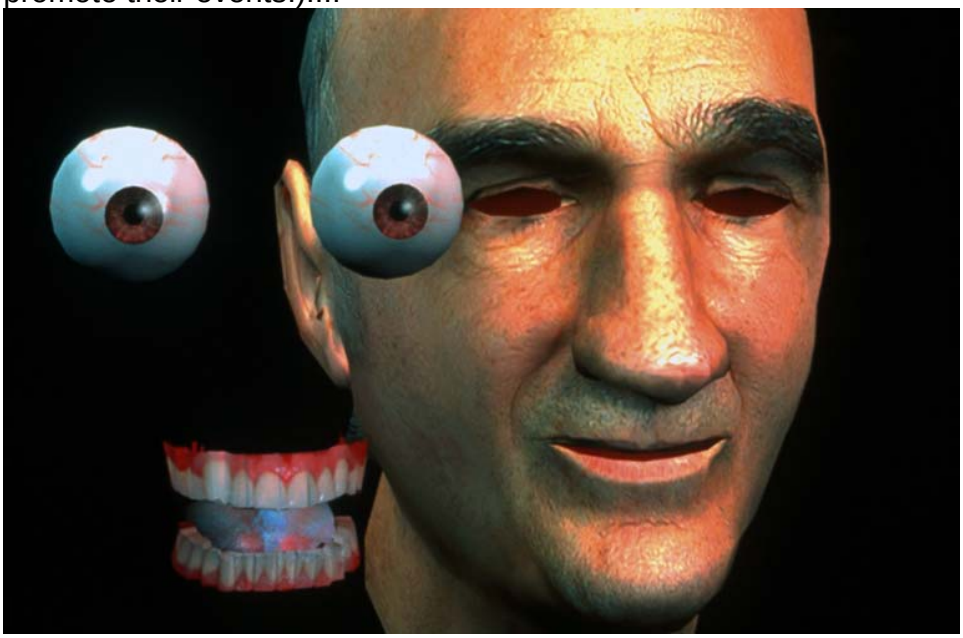
In fact, this kind of positioning of the body in a state of indifference has made both the physically difficult and the technically complex performances possible to realise. I wouldn't characterise what's happening in Performance in terms of a media-human dichotomy. Anyway, what constitutes ‘media’ and what constitutes ‘human’ is constantly being redefined through their interaction. The concerns with all my projects and performances is what can be exposed and what can be experienced that is remote, intimate, alternate, involuntary and alien to itself. An experience of something inner, of something other, beyond individual agency, beyond mere biology....

ES: *Have developments in media and information technology really made new modes of performance possible in areas such as time-based art, new media art and multimedia performance, or is the rise of DJs and VeeJays as performers attributable to the proliferation of the discourses of performance? For instance, the digital installation piece* Modell 5 *by the art collective Granular Synthesis is described by the artists in the company as a 'live performance'. The live component of the performance consists in the mixing of images and soundtrack and controlling the levels of sub-bass. It’s hardly the stuff of conventional performance aesthetics, though it is nonetheless linked to the notion of presence.*

S: Oh, agreed that it's due to the proliferation of new Performance discourses. DJs and VJs manipulate sounds and images in real-time and the particular way they might do this constitutes a performance. A Granular Synthesis installation

might very well be called a performance. Something happens over time with a certain intensity and interplay of images and sounds. A choreography occurs. OK, not of a live body, but often with an awareness of issues of presence, embodiment, agency and identity made apparent but problematic. There is an understanding that people seeing such an installation will be immersed and affected, their presence completing the art installation.

The word performance has been generalised and become a more common currency. Performance is now parasitic and pervasive with a variety of viral manifestations in different host bodies or host art forms. (I do, though, make a distinction between my presentations and performances, and am constantly irritated by organisations who deliberately want to blurr the two, primarily to better promote their events.)....



PROSTHETIC HEAD
(Eyeballs, tongue and teeth are separate moving elements) Melbourne and San Francisco, 2003
Programmers: Karen Marcelo, Sam Trychin
3D Model: Barrett Fox

ES: *One of the functions of the media, as Frederic Jameson suggests, is 'to help us forget', to relegate events as quickly as possible into the past. Live performance could once be seen as a guarantor of organic memory, of the exchange of embodied memories and the handing on of tradition before an audience. Does it continue to operate in this way in the information age? How does new media performance address the memory problem?*

S: That's an astute observation by Jameson. Hmmm, I once noted that in the electronic realm, we are in a state of erasure rather than affirmation. We should not be perpetuating outmoded metaphysical notions, or obsolete biological bodies. There is a need to engineer alternate and extended operational systems

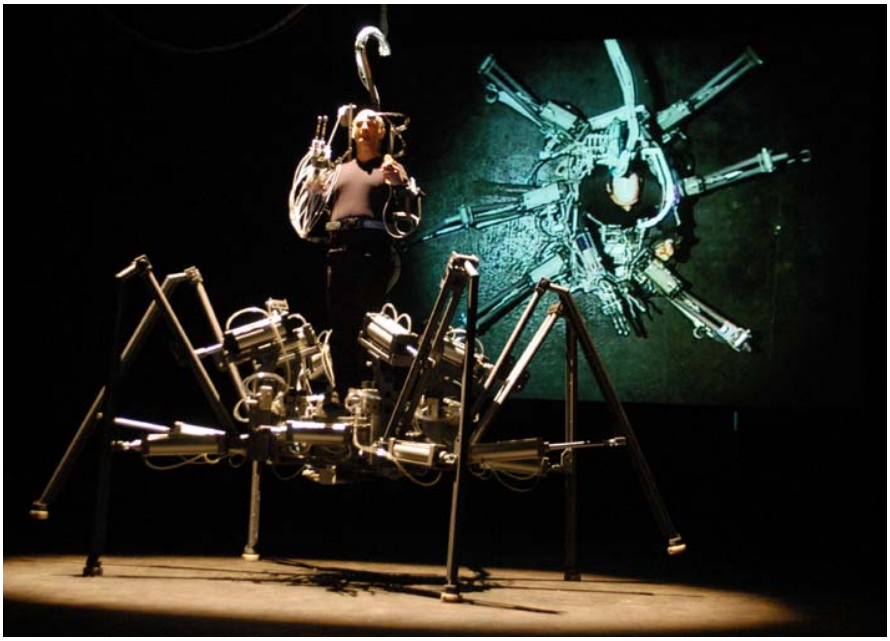
of bodies coupled to machines—enabling remote and telematic projection. Perhaps Performance was once about the exchange of organic memory, but it has never been for me. Possessed with experiences of multiple agency, involuntary movement and split physiology, and having to function with increasing speed—the space between intention and action collapsing—the body can no longer simply resort to reflection and memory. New media both encapsulates experiences and better retrieves and replays ideas and images.

Machines function beyond the metabolism of bodies. There is an increasing gap between body and machine-sensing and their speed of operation. Not to mention the reliability of the retrieval of stored information. How can the body function effectively in stimulus-response situations in the hyper-speed and complexity of tech terrains? It is in this space where human-machine and human-computer interface becomes so critical.....

ES: *Shimizu Shinjin, from the post-butoh company Gekidan Kaitaisha, describes the first Gulf War as the 'war without bodies'. The second Gulf War has seen a return of the body with the explosion of images from Abu Graib. What are some of the issues for the status of the body in light of the second Gulf War?*

S: Certainly the first Gulf War was projected by the military and media as a remote war of smart missiles and laser guided bombs. There were incessant video replays seemingly proving their clinical, deadly accuracy, implying a minimization of 'collateral damage'. My intense memory of that war, though, was of the bombed and burnt-out tanks and trucks of the fleeing Iraq army on the road to Baghdad. These scenes were littered with bodies. A 'war without bodies' is always the aerial and strategic view, the military media-projected perception. What it's really about is the obliteration of bodies beyond recognition. I'm sure the ground-level view of the Iraqis in the first Gulf War was not a 'war without bodies'. The images from Abu Graib, of course, were about abuse of bodies whilst incarcerated, of 'extreme interrogation' that was about overt tormenting and torture of individual bodies. These are certainly abhorrent acts shameful in their inhumane treatment of combatants and other innocents unfortunately captured. Aerial obliteration of bodies has now become much more acceptable and is even seen as somewhat more humane than the cruel beheading of one individual body. That's how pathological this has all become....

ES: *Viewer interactions with media artworks tend to be dynamic and spontaneous as if to counter what Lev Manovich calls 'totalitarian interactivity', the way that new media art manipulates viewers' subjective engagements to follow an established network of links, rather than to let them make their own associations with an image or an artwork.*
<http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/totalitarian.html>
Is interactivity, even of the totalitarian kind, going to be an important aspect of the experience of live performance in the future?



EXOSKELETON
Cankarjev Dom- Warehouse Vrhnika
Ljubljana, 2003
Photograph: Igor Skafar

S: There are certainly different strategies and interactive techniques which have been the result of both the technical limitations of new media and the cultural backdrop of their production. I find Lev Manovich's notion of 'totalitarian interactivity' intriguing. But what is of general significance is that the combination of sensors, video systems and computer technologies allows for the construction of more responsive, ephemeral, real-time interactive architectures. Performance spaces and installations become more intelligent generative feedback loops of not only images, but also haptic experiences.

Spaces are not only structures, but responsive screens that can inscribe and reflect a user's position, velocity and even mood. GPS allows the mapping of information, sound and images of particular locations onto a mobile body, augmenting its perception and understanding. Yes, the surveillance of bodies becomes a concern in a social space, but surveillance of the internal space of bodies becomes a necessary strategy for maintenance and the construction of life-support and life-extending systems for vulnerable bodies. Such micro-miniaturised devices might detect pathological changes in temperature and chemistry, alerting the body before symptoms surface. It's the beginning of the re-colonisation of the body with nanosensors and nanobots to augment its bacterial and viral population. This is an unexpected cyborg construct where the body swallows its technologies. The inside of a body becomes the new landscape for machines to inhabit. All technology of the future will be invisible because it will be inside the body ….