

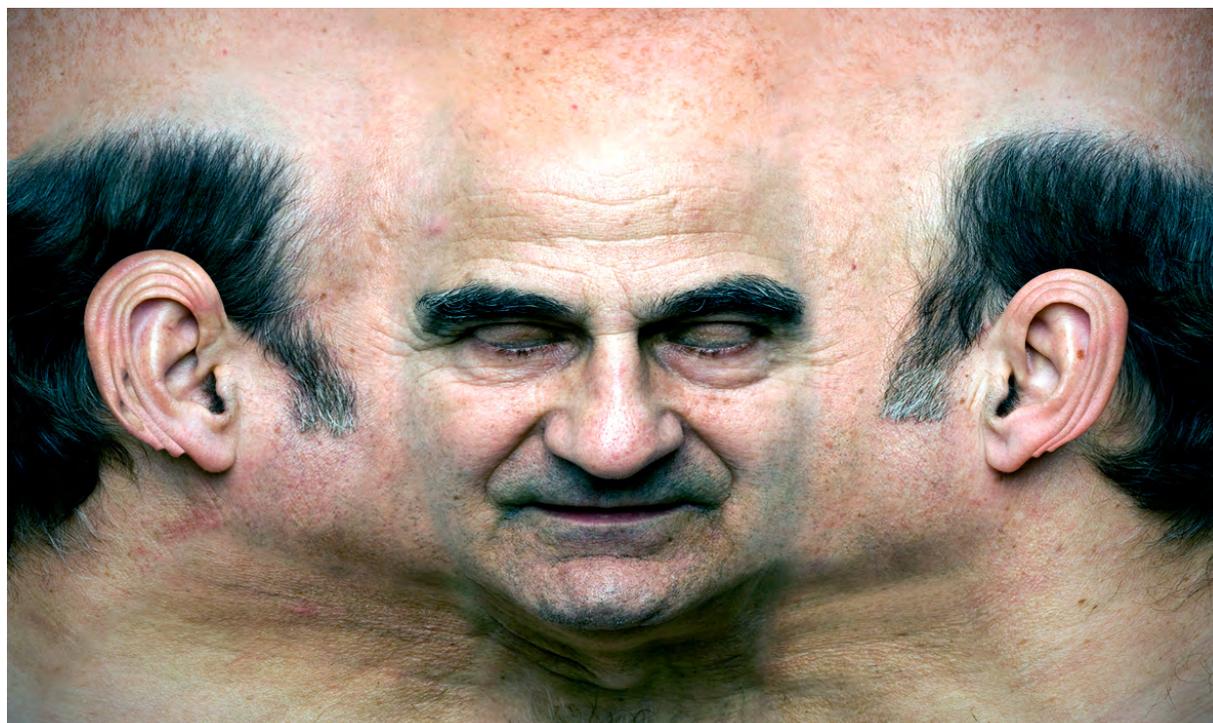
## Stelarc

# On the Body as an Artistic Material

*Interview with Stahl Stenslie in August - September 2014*

### Introduction

The Australian artist Stelarc is one of the most remarkable performance artists around. For more than five decades he has employed his own body as the centerpiece in a wide range of artworks. He is known for artworks such as the *Third Arm*, a cybernetic device and body extension in the form of an arm; body suspension performances in which he hangs from cranes thirty meters above the ground; performance works involving the public's remote control of his body through electric muscle stimulation via the Internet; body invasive works involving electronic sculpture placed inside his stomach and a functional electronic ear transplanted onto and into his arm.



1. *Stretched Skin*. Photographer: Graham Baring.

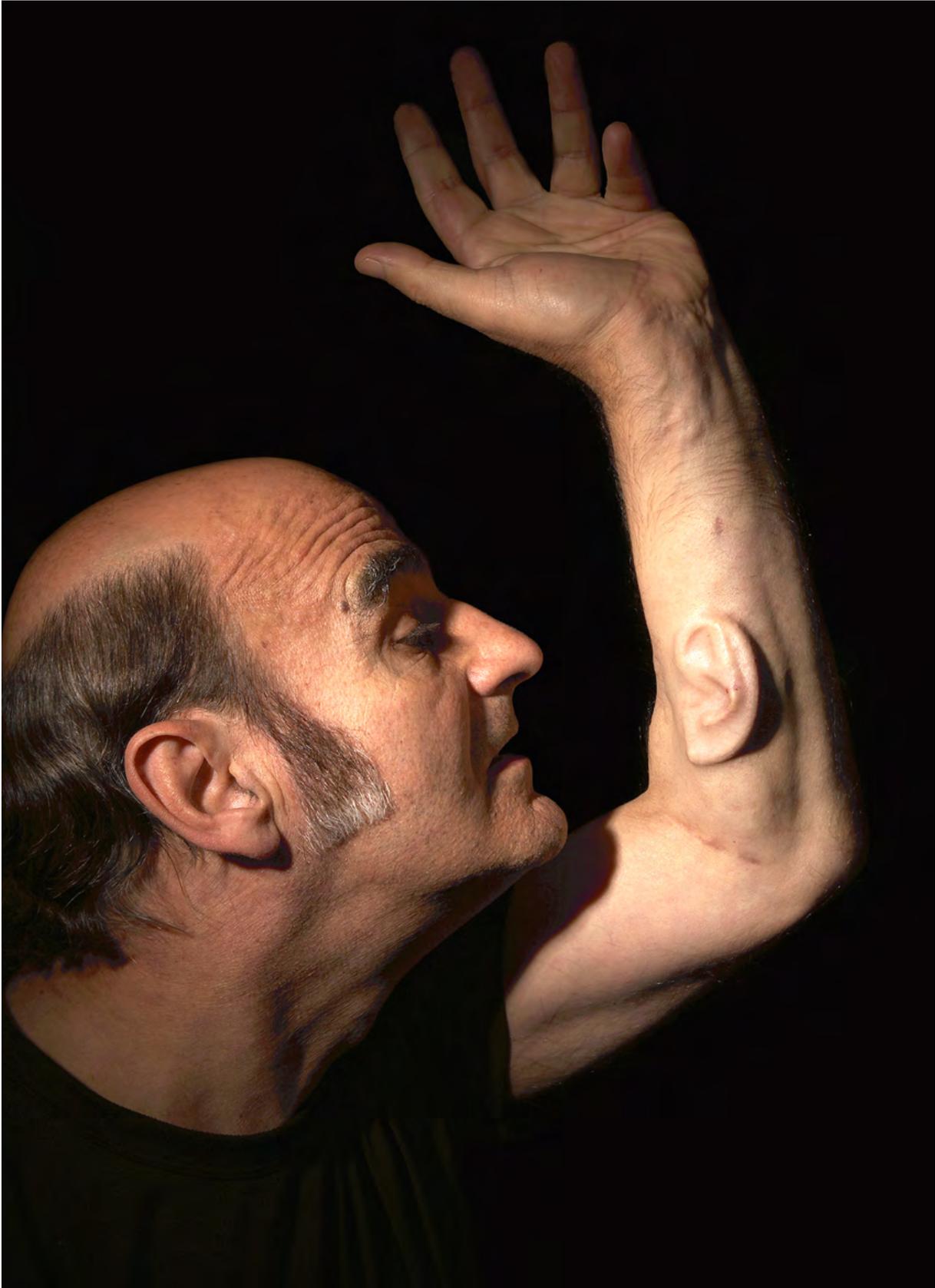
His wide range of performance-based works has extended our understanding of how the body can be used as a living material in art and technology. Although this art often expresses his concept that the natural human body is obsolete by extending the body's capabilities by incorporating cyborg-like devices, Stelarc's core investigations can also be seen as centered on how the soma can be used as a medium or material for aesthetic experience and knowledge building. This makes him a very interesting figure for the connections of art with somaesthetics, because he is clearly using his "body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning" and doing so in a deliberate and critically reflective way.

The following dialogue with Stelarc, which took place during two Skype conversations in August - September 2014, explores his understanding of these themes and how they relate to his artistic project and strategies:

## The Dialogue

*Stahl Stenslie (S): How far do you see the body as artistic material? How do you evaluate its role?*

**Stelarc:** The body has always been considered as a component of an installation. The body is a sculpture of stretched skin in the suspension performances. The premise has always been that if you adjust the architecture of the body you might adjust its operation and awareness in the world. Having an extra ear, a third hand, an extended arm, translating human bipedal into a six-legged insect like locomotion with the Exoskeleton robot are some of the projects that alter the evolutionary architecture of the body. On a social level, the body's meaningfulness is only in relationship to other bodies, artifacts and institutions. As a particular person I can express certain feelings, but it can be argued that our desires and affect are social and cultural constructs.



2. *Ear On Arm*. Photographer: Nina Sellars.

*S: In terms of your own famous performance works employing the body, I remember seeing a video of your Copenhagen piece, where you were pulled up by a crane.*

**Stelarc:** Yes, it was just the naked body hoisted up a large crane, about 30 meters high, shuttled to the end of the crane arm, rotated around several times and then lowered back down to street level. It was above the Royal Theatre in the city center.

*S: You were held up by those strings or cords, and you could hover over the city. It was not simply your body that was put up on display, but the body's vulnerability, the fear of skin being ripped off, of falling to your death. And yet, there was also the almost angel-like image of a person hovering above the city. It was really fantastic.*

**Stelarc:** My problem was my fear of heights ha, ha. There was the option the day before to ascend up the crane to check out the situation. But I decided not to, in case that dissuaded me to do the performance. It's interesting that the Copenhagen performance was only the second really public suspension performance. The other one was in New York but that was only four stories high. But in neither instance did I plan or feel the fear of putting the body at risk. I had done many suspensions before those ones and for me if it was safe to suspend the body one meter off a gallery floor, it was safe enough much higher. Having said that cables instead of cords were used. Previously the body had been suspended by the seaside or counterbalanced by a ring of rocks. What was important was this image of the body suspended in space - whether it was in a gallery just above the floor or whether outdoors and very high. Copenhagen was different from New York, where I could hear the sounds from street level, people shouting, police cars arriving. Being so high in Copenhagen meant all I could hear was the whooshing of the wind, the whirring of the crane motors and the creaking of the stretching skin. Although you cannot see that in the video, my body was actually shaking from the wind. Above the level of the buildings, unprotected, there was a reasonably strong wind and it was literally vibrating my skin. That was unexpected, unplanned, we did not know whether it was going to be windy or not that day. But those suspension performances were the only ones in public spaces.

*S: Do you recall your feelings while being held up by the crane, beyond those sounds?*

**Stelarc:** The performances are done in what I call a posture of indifference. By that I mean allowing the performance to unfold in its own time and with its own

rhythm. There's a point in time when the planning is over, the thinking needs to stop and to allow the act to begin. Yes, I looked down and around whilst suspended, visually framing the body in its surrounds. But this indifference that erases affect allows the idea to be enacted. What was felt was only the physical. A concern with the structural and operational aspects of the performance. What's important is not what this body felt, but what the performance expressed. A distinction should also be made between affect and sensation. In fact, the suspensions should be seen as spectacles of bodily sensation, expressed in different spaces and in diverse situations. They are not actions for interpretation, nor require any explanation. They are not meant to generate any meaning. Rather they are sites of indifference and states of erasure. The body is empty, absent to its own agency and obsolete.



3. *Ear On Arm Suspension*. Photographer- Poli Papapetrou.

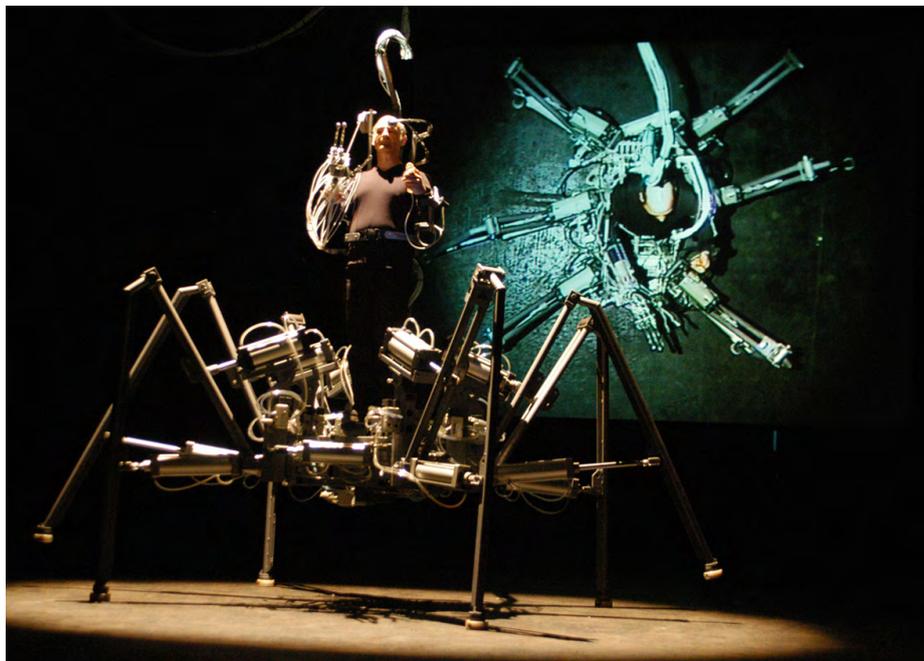
**S:** *That brings us back to my first question. Do you see the body as some kind of material that in certain degree can be depersonalized?*

**Stelarc:** These performances are not about an insight into the psycho-social status of the body. Rather the body is seen as a structure, as a sculptural medium, not as a site for social inscription. The body is this structure of skeletal support, draped musculature, with a collection of organs and circulatory systems of nerves and

blood – all bounded by a bag of skin. But this structure also includes empty spaces. Having made 3 endoscopic films of the inside of my body in the early seventies this realization of a body of empty spaces led to the stomach sculpture project, where an artwork is designed not for a public space, but rather for a private physiological space. The body has always been seen as a sculptural medium, and as a structure with empty spaces.

*S:* One of the things I like about your work and that makes it distinctive is that you not only conceive these projects, you also perform them yourself. I do not really see, for example, people trying to recreate the Copenhagen performance.

**Stelarc:** That's an interesting observation. But why would anyone want to recreate that performance? There was never an impulse to recreate a suspension performance whilst with the *Exoskeleton* walking robot performance, that's been performed multiple times. These are very different approaches. With *Exoskeleton* it's about taking the robot for a walk. Although the performance is structured it is not scripted. Although I'm performing with a robot, each walk is a different one. Each choreography of movement and the resulting cacophony and composition of sound is actually different. I have only performed with this large robot about twelve times and I am still discovering what I can do with it. So with *Exoskeleton* it is rather learning new ways of performing with the robot. But with suspension performances, they have always been one off.



4. *Exoskeleton*. Photographer: Igor Skafar.

In 2012 I was invited to Oslo to participate in a SusCon, an event held by the body modification and suspension community. Initially, Havve Fjell, one of the organizers suggested that perhaps they could re-create one of my past suspensions to commemorate my being there. I suggested that it would be better to come up with an original suspension idea. I had always been interested in realizing a multiple suspension. But when I was actively doing body suspensions it was difficult to find anyone else to participate. Anyway, five people – two male and three females – participated in the performance which was titled *Spinning / Breathing: Event for Multiple Suspensions*. They were suspended upright, one female body counterbalancing one male body and the other male body counterbalancing the other two female bodies. The bodies turned around each other and also spun on their axis. Their breathing was amplified by small microphones stapled to their cheeks. The performance was terminated after about twenty minutes when a male body passed out. But it was a beautiful performance with the multiple bodies rhythmically amplifying the suspension. As I had recently done a suspension of my own - *The Ear on Arm* suspension in 2012, where I suspended my body above the four-meter long sculpture of the ear on my arm, I decided not to be a participant, but rather a designer and the person who documented the performance.

When I got to Dallas in 2013 for another SusCon, and again with Havve Fjell's collaboration, we designed a performance for six bodies arranged in hexagonal configuration. These bodies would be suspended and would be spinning, with the sound of the structure amplified. This performance lasted for about 20 minutes. They were slowly hoisted up and lowered down whilst spinning, and the documentation of this performance was enhanced with the positioning of cameras above and below the spinning bodies. The interesting thing about this performance was the projection of the shadow of these rotating bodies on the screen. In fact, it has become known as the *Shadow Suspension*. This mass of suspended bodies collapsed onto a wall as a shadow. That was a surprising outcome. The shadow becomes the image that encapsulated the performance, a kind of inversion of the Platonic idea of shadows in the cave.

**S:** *Your body is your medium and plays a key role in your practice, but, if the Exoskeleton is in some way a structure beyond your own body, could other people enter it and perform the Robot? Would it not still be Stelarc, by which I mean Stelarc's purposive, experiential body or soma, within the machinery.*

**Stelarc:** Yes, someone else can perform with the robot, someone else can learn to operate the third hand, someone else can be suspended. And that is fine. In the end

it's not about this particular person. It is the act of walking with six legs, extending a body with an extra hand, of becoming a landscape of stretched skin. What this person does is contextualize these performances as artworks. And in that case it is about a particular and peculiar sensibility.

*S: How would you describe the difference between your sensibilities as an artist versus those of other people doing suspensions?*

**Stelarc:** Oh, they are very different contexts. For example, when I went to Dallas there was only one suspension group that performed in galleries. Everyone else was doing it in the context of being part of the body modification and suspension community. It appeared they were interested in the experience as a kind of brutal act, as a purely physical act and others as a personal challenge or perhaps a pseudo-spiritual act. There was no framing of the performance with any particular artistic sensibility. This is not belittling suspensions done in the body modification and suspension community. This is a response to a question and providing a plausible response. This would not ordinarily be of concern to me. But there is a fundamental physiological outcome that occurs when you do such an extreme act. The physical act justifies itself. But going back to the distinction you were concerned with, I guess it's like the difference between someone just splashing paint on a canvas as a mere physical act and Willem de Kooning splashing paint on the canvas. He would be doing that with a particular sensibility, conditioned and colored within a particular art historical context.



5. *Spinning / Breathing: Event for Multiple Suspensions*. Shown at SusCon, Oslo 2012. Photographer: Stahl Stenslie.

*S: Context, or course, is crucial. When I saw your suspension sculpture back in Oslo, 2012, it was an amazing spectacle. For me the beauty of the installation was not just the experience of the final suspension, but also the preparation process: all the bodies being prepared, all the buildup, all these people coming together in this beautiful composition. This process of bodies being organized and ritually sacrificed in a way. It was very complex installation where the actual suspension at the top of the sculpture completed, yet was only a small segment of complex process. To be a part of the audience was indeed breathtaking.*

**Stelarc:** Oh, it is excellent to get feedback from you in particular about the performance from someone who was there watching it all unfold. I'm sure Havve would be pleased to hear that too. The process did expose the duration and the difficulty of preparing for the performance. And for this artist there is no definitive start nor end but rather an unfolding towards something remarkable, something transgressive, and then a returning to the mundane, everyday body. It's interesting that with both the Oslo and Dallas performances in which other people were suspended, there were problems about having completely naked bodies in suspension – and these problems were raised both by the people participating and by the venue organizers. I always think of a suspended body as a naked body, a body whose nakedness is harshly visible because of the stretched skin and the hooks visibly embedded into the skin. There is a distinctive aesthetic of this landscape of stretched skin. But in the suspension community most of the people who do suspensions do them partially clothed. They might take their shirt off but they would be wearing trousers or they would be wearing underwear. I always found this a little strange, because in terms of how one frames the sensibility of that sort of performance, nakedness is part of what it's all about, at least for this artist. A person who wanted to participate in that performance, decided to pull out after she found out that it would involve complete nudity. She was willing to be suspended from hooks into her skin, but she was not willing to do it with her clothes off. I found this interesting in a contradictory way. If you are exhibiting your body as a physical body, why not to show it in its full physicality even if it means revealing pubic hair - or hanging genitalia.

*S: Morally this attitude is also puzzling; because in conventional terms, in most people's moral outlook, putting hooks through your skin to stretch and extend it, is morally just as questionable as showing your naked body.*

**Stelarc:** I had a discussion with her about that, but I do understand her modesty, especially since the performance was also a very public one. It has to be said that we were almost unable to do the performance in Dallas, because the organizers had a hard time finding a venue that would allow full nudity in the performance. There were a lot of venues that would allow the suspensions, but not the full nudity. Of course the United States can be quite a moralistic country, but this was also a problem in Oslo.

*S: The multiple body suspension in the Oslo performance was really, artistically speaking, a spectacular thing. Do you have any plans to do those beautiful body sculptures in a museum context to try to contextualize it artistically even more?*

**Stelarc:** No there are no plans to perform these multiple body suspensions in galleries or museums. But I am open to possibilities. If any such performances occurred it would not be about replicating these particular ones. As with my own suspensions I did twenty-seven over a period of thirteen years in multiple positions, in varying situations and in different locations until I felt I had aesthetically exhausted the possibilities. Further iterations with multiple bodies though present new challenges ha, ha. With both Oslo and Dallas it just happened, it unfolded in a very normal sense. There was a community of people who were willing participants, comfortable about being suspended and I was interested in pursuing suspensions with multiple bodies even when this did not include my body. But I am not pursuing possibilities. It could happen again. In fact there was a multiple body suspension event planned in Mexico in October 2013 but unfortunately it could not be funded. It is not easy to get funding for such performances. I am not really interested in doing performances that are not challenging.

*S: In the public's perception the body suspension pieces seem to be very painful events.*

**Stelarc:** I never conceived them as actions for generating pain. Instead these works are envisaged in terms of certain ideas whose actualizations are physically challenging and even physically difficult. Of course, there is pain as an inevitable outcome. The suspensions were extreme physical actions, and in every one of these events there was always a fine line between doing them and not doing them. In other words, doing one did not make it easier to do a second one; and doing two did not make it easier to do a third. Each time I knew what was going to happen: fourteen to eighteen hooks were going to be inserted into my skin, with no anesthetic, no medication. I had to endure each of those hook insertions, and

that was only the first stage of the physical difficulty. The second stage is when everything is put under tension; and then finally the most extreme stage is when the body lifts off the ground. Everything is stretched as much as it can be, and then the body is suspended. And later when you touch down again, the skin sucks back into place, which is also a painful moment. Finally, of course, extracting the hooks is irritating; and if that is not done carefully it could generate even more discomfort.

Here it is useful to comment that even though the strategy of such a performance was not about generating pain, there is important insight that the pain brings to you. In such a painful situation you collapse the distinction between mind and body. You are one painful body absorbed by the power of the extreme discomfort experienced. You cannot mentally detach and become reflective. In other words you collapse that convenient Cartesian distinction between mind and body. You are just this one throbbing experience. This is the extreme, immersive and collapsed condition you become when you experience intense pain. I guess this is what is so seductive about sado-masochistic pursuits, fueled by desires of control and power.

Physiologically though pain is an early alert warning system that something wrong is happening with the body. That care must be taken with receiving treatment for this painful condition. If an athlete becomes injured pain is felt that indicates the seriousness of the problem. To block the pain with anesthetics and continue competing might result in more serious injury. But a person dying of lung cancer will experience pain when it would be better that the body no longer generates it. So pain is a problematic condition to evaluate whether conceptually, medically or culturally.



6. *Split Body: Voltage In / Voltage Out*. Photographer: Igor Andjelic.

*S: Could you tell us about your background and how you evolved into an artist and into the kind of artist that you are?*

**Stelarc:** I was born in Cyprus, both my parents are Greek. We immigrated to Australia when I was about four years old. I grew up in Melbourne and did my art education there, but after three years I was not allowed to continue at art school (essentially informed I'd be better off leaving), so I do not even have a degree. At the time I was interested in sculpture, but I was making helmets and goggles that you wore and that altered your visual perception. They split your binocular vision, so what you saw were two unrelated, constantly changing but superimposed images. I also constructed a three-meter diameter immersive kinetic compartment that generated fragmented images and electronic sounds. I guess the art school thought that, because I was not casting, not carving and not welding, I was not doing any sculpture at all. This was the late sixties which might have been a progressively experimental in some places, but art training was still pretty conservative in Australia. It was very disappointing for me, because there were some contemporary artists that I admired who taught me, but there was only one person in my first year at art school, Ken Scarlett, who encouraged and supported me. After a year of thinking what to do, I decided to go somewhere else. Having grown up in Australia with Greek parents, my culture was entirely Western, having studied western art and read western philosophy. I thought it would be interesting to go to an Asian country to experience an oriental culture. To me the only country in Asia that was interesting, and that was also Hi-Tech, was Japan. I went thinking I would stay there for a year, but I stayed for 19 years. I arrived in 1970 when the most interesting performance art of the Gutai group that were very active in the sixties had essentially died out. I liked the people and the culture in Japan, because it was all interesting and new to me. Then I got a job teaching art at an international school, so I just continued living there. I met some gallery directors and one of them, Noburo Yamagishi, the director of the Maki, Tamura and Komai Galleries, was very supportive of my work. But in Japan at that time, if you wanted to have an exhibition at a gallery, you basically had to rent the space (except for a few select galleries). Of course, it was very expensive to rent a gallery even though exhibitions in Tokyo only lasted for a week. Fortunately, I was doing performance work that would only require a gallery for a day. So the day between the change over between one exhibition and the next, which was typically on Sunday, I could get the gallery for a few hours before the other artists moved in, and I could do a performance there. Sometimes, the incoming artist canceled

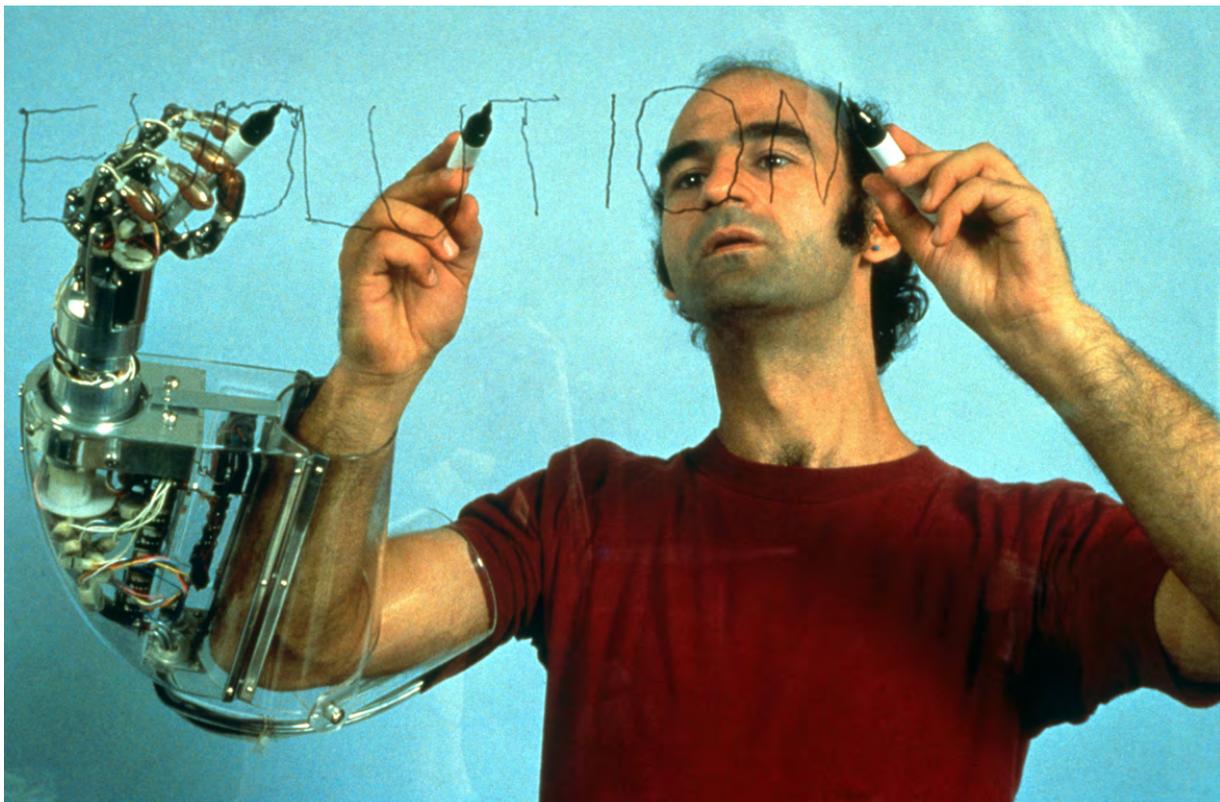
at the last minute because they couldn't come up with the funding or something or had not completed their artworks. Yamagishi-san would then call me to say that the gallery was free for the next week and that I could do something in it without paying for the rent of the space. That accounts for the longer durational performances I did in Japan. Other galleries became available to me too. Things just happened; I was kind of a silent guy who would hang out in the gallery and could not speak much Japanese and did not fully understand what was going on. But somehow, without knowing how, I would get invited to participate in group shows without my having to push or hustle to be included. Some of the artists found my work interesting and wanted to include me in their group exhibitions. And of course I was the esoteric gaijin inclusion in their group exhibitions.

*S: How do you explain that shift from making helmets, goggles, and strange perceptual experiments to using your body as your medium?*

**Stelarc:** Well, I was always interested in the body as an evolutionary architecture and the body's perceptual and cognitive capabilities. The wearable helmets, goggles and immersive installation were an outcome of those general concerns. The idea of the body itself as an artwork. This particular body becomes a convenient body to use. I did not have to worry about problems of causing harm to someone else's body or about the ethical issues involved. For example, inserting a sculpture inside this particular body as opposed to inserting it into someone else's body, male or female, is a totally different act ethically, aesthetically, and in terms of safety. You can see how my practice evolved. When I was making helmets and goggles I was splitting my binocular vision, I was altering optically what my body saw, what my body experienced. Then the suspension performances were the end of a long series of performances exploring the physical and psychological parameters of my body. For example, I did sensory deprivation performances over 3-4 years leading up to the first suspension event. For example, I stitched my lips and eyelids shut with surgical thread and I was tethered to the gallery wall with two hooks into my skin connecting with cables bolted to the wall. I stayed there for one week, not speaking, not drinking, not seeing. I could only hear people coming in and out of the gallery, and I could understand that it was night when there was no sound. The gallery space was illuminated all during that week, so I could not make out any changes in the light in the space. That was the performance immediately before the first suspension event.

**S:** *That is pretty hardcore, a radical transition from making helmets. Was that a Japanese influence?*

**Stelarc:** I have to say, quite honestly, there was no Japanese influence as such until I initiated the third hand project. Then, of course, Japan was the place where high tech robotics was happening and I could get good advice there and see other excellent examples of state-of-the-art robotics at Waseda University (prosthetics and humanoid robots) and at Tokyo Institute of Technology (insect and animal like robots). But in Japan the sort of physical body performances like those earlier done by the Gutai group were no longer being performed, so my work was not reviewed in art journals, but more in popular tabloids and magazines, or, when I started with the third hand project, in science-oriented publications. Although I was exhibiting in Japan from the early 70s, I was not really acknowledged as part of the arts community until the mid 80s. And my artist friends would remind me of a Japanese saying- “high tech, low art” ha, ha.



7. *Handwriting*. Photographer- Keisuke Oki.

*S: Even as early as your days in art school, you clearly had your own way of doing things. What inspirations gave you your direction? Was there a special source or some people around you that directed you to use your body that way for art?*

**Stelarc:** I guess there were several impulses to go in that direction. First, I was very interested in the evolutionary architecture of the human body and comparative anatomy, looking at insects and animals to see how they move and manipulate things and comparing them to how our human body operates. I was reading about things such as how dogs only see in black and white, how bats navigate with ultrasound, snakes sense through heat. I realized that my philosophy of the world is very much determined by my physiology, not only by my five senses but also, because of the images I see and the information that is generated through technology. Our instruments and machines contour and condition our experience of the world. The scale shifts from macro to micro. In other words, our realm of operation becomes this abstract realm of the unseen, the unheard, the unfelt. This is what happens when you look into microscopes, peer into telescopes and use various forms of computational data visualization systems. In other words we are now clothed in a skin of virtuality. A second skin that mediates your sensory or direct experience of the world. Another significant impulse in this body-oriented direction was that from the outset of my performance work I was always envious of gymnasts, of dancers and singers who use their own bodies as a means of expression but also for experiencing. The expression and the experience are tightly coupled. If you are a painter, there is a kind of disconnect between the input and output. What you paint (that is, content that goes beyond the medium it is employing) is not what you physically experience. Of course if you are Jackson Pollock, the actual dripping and dribbling and moving your body, and splashing the paint around, then there is more of a coupling of the input and the output. But if you are a painter in the conventionally accepted sense, you are dealing with images and ideas that are more abstract, so you don't have to take the physical consequences of what you paint. If you paint a suspended body it is very different from performing a suspended body. Reading about yoga is not actually doing yoga.

*S: You have developed your work in a remarkably unique way. You seem to be a human cyborg, with a third arm, an ear on the arm, and you've done all these radical experiences. Could you also call yourself a body artist, a performance artist, a living artwork? How would you name or identify your art practice after all these years?*

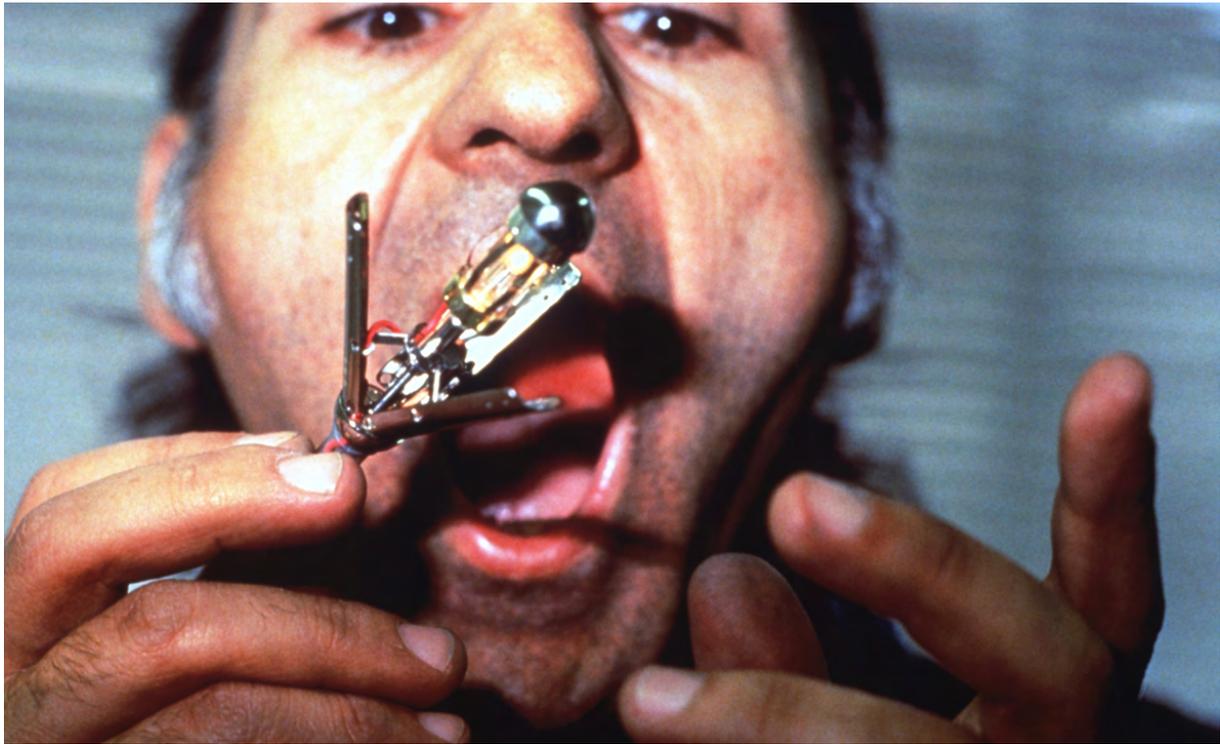
**Stelarc:** There has also been an interesting evolution in the names or genre of

categories of art and artists in past half century. In the 60s as a younger artist, I was familiar with the events and happenings of Allan Kaprow, the performances of Robert Rauschenberg, Pop art, Andy Warhol and The Garage, and the installation work of Edward Keinholz, and other artists in that genre. Initially I wanted to describe what I did as events, because the word *performance* had a theatrical coloring. When we talk about performance, we think of it in that kind of context. At the time I tried to avoid using the word *performance*. If I did not use the word *event*, I used the word *action*, referencing (in art-historical terms) the Austrian performance work of Viennese Actionism from the fifties and sixties. The word *performance* was more a category that came out of the United States. For example, you may remember the performances of the Kipper Kids, a West coast spaghetti and tomato sauce performance pair. Quite kitsch, very messy, quite theatrical. Similarly with the fake operations done by Paul McCarthy at that time. Those performances were much more playful than the more austere and harsh interrogation of the body typical of European body art. Having said that, this cannot be said of the potent performances of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Tehching Hsieh. So some of the early performance artists from the USA, were about the psychology of the body, the physicality and about performing dangerous acts. And then, of course, in Europe there was raw physicality, for of Ulay and Marina Abramovic and Stuart Brisley in the UK whose work also involved using shit and body excrements. I was not interested in performances that were deliberately trying to be extreme. For me, there were these ideas some of which were physically difficult to realize and you had to take the physical consequences of trying to actualize those ideas. As a performance artist it was actualizing the idea that was important. Actualizing the idea meant that I could directly experience it and therefore have something meaningful to articulate. I have never been an academic complicit with a particular discourse. Performance Art became a commonly accepted name because of magazines like Flash Art and other USA magazines. I just accepted that term. I did not title or describe my early works as performances though. Take for example *Seaside Suspension*, the subtitle of which is *Event for Wind and Waves*. A lot of performances have that kind of description. The notion of event denoted for me a singular, one-time action.

**S:** *Your work in cyborg aesthetics and body extension like The Third Arm is very well known. Yet I think of you as very much human; not a mechanical robot, but alive, curious and sensitive. What about the dangers and crossover effects of your work? It is quite extreme to extend your body in the ways you have been doing. How do you perceive the use of your living, sentient body, or 'soma' as we like to call it in*

*somaesthetic discourse ?*

**Stelarc:** When we speak about the body in this way, as if I, who owns this body, am using this body, we are entangled in language problems. We can rephrase what we are trying to express by saying this body performs this suspension in this particular location and has these kinds of experiences which resulted from these kinds of ideas and then we do not have to be nostalgic for a body with a separate and individual agency that is responsible for how its body acts. This body interaction is the result of this person being inserted in a particular place at a certain time, with a certain cultural conditioning within social institutions, constraining it or allowing it to perform in particular and sometimes peculiar ways – at this point in time in our history. Yes, it is a particular body that is realizing this suspension process, but it is not a single agency that determines what is going to happen when it is going to happen and what the outcome will be. How we talk about the body and its agency depends how you frame it. If we frame it in a very limited way, at this point in time, for in this particular place, then this body can say: “I picked this bottle of water up, I drink this water, I put this bottle down.” What has resulted in this action is not just me simplistically thinking that I initiated all that, that I just did all that. Firstly, this bottle has been sitting here since yesterday, I filled it up outside in this building, because several weeks ago my partner Nina said: “You do not drink enough water. You should drink more water every day.” In actuality there is an infinite number of causal events that resulted in this moment where I can say: “I lift this bottle of water up”. Yes it is convenient to say now that I want to drink water or I am thirsty but what does thirsty mean? If I see a water bottle within reach maybe that is why I feel thirsty. I just want to problematize this simplistic idea of an individual agency that we commonly, popularly believe in. To go further I would agree with Wittgenstein that this person who speaks as an “I” is the body whose lips move, it is not because of a mind inside a head. And with Nietzsche who asserts that there is no being without the doing, it is the act itself that is the reality.



8. *Stomach Sculpture*. Photographer: Anthony Figallo.

*S: Bodies move, act, and also feel pain. I return to the question of pain because your performances appear painful. But if I understand you correctly, pain does not have a specific functionality in your work beyond it being a byproduct of the artistic idea you want to express.*

**Stelarc:** As indicated before, what you describe as extreme acts that generate pain can occur only because the artist performs them with a posture of indifference. You allow things to happen. You trust in your thinking and planning and your assistants. If you want to insert a sculpture inside your body, you have to consider the consequences and plan accordingly. You have to design and have engineered an object that can close into a form that can be inserted down through your esophagus. When it is inside your stomach it will open and close and emit a flashing light and a beeping sound. It is a machine choreography, a simple robot inside your stomach, actuated by a servo motor and a logic circuit. You have to allow that to happen, allow that to unfold. It was a very uncomfortable experience to have both the control cable of the sculpture (8mm in diameter) and the endoscope (10cm in diameter) both being pushed down your throat. My throat had to be sprayed with anesthetic to stop me gagging. And it took six insertions over a period of two days to film about fifteen minutes of video. The endoscopist who was assisting called

the procedure to a halt when scraping the esophagus produced some bleeding. Unless you are prepared to have these things happen, to experience that physical difficulty, then you will not be able to actualize the idea. Again, there comes a point in time with an artistic performance or in any other action when thinking stops, when it has to stop, and the physical act begins. It is with that kind of mentality that I approach my work. You just have to do it. But, of course, the consequences follow.

*S: Since you mentioned the Viennese actionists and since we're discussing the body and pain, I can't help thinking of Rudolf Schwarzkogler, one of the Viennese actionists, who died from cutting off his own penis. That was certainly extreme.*

**Stelarc:** Yes, the Viennese actionists were extreme body artists, and they certainly explored the body's materiality. Hurting the body, cutting the skin, bleeding, all those sorts of things which have become more familiar and almost part of the body-modification community and body-performance community these days. What I find especially interesting about art and about performance artists, beyond the impulse to experiment, is how that performance is structured or allowed to unfold in its own way, how structured but unscripted it is, whether it is repeatable or not repeatable. For example, many of Marina Abramovic performances were not imagined as repeatable performances or as performances done by others. But in New York when Marina had that retrospective at MoMa in 2010, some of her performances were recreated, re-performed by people other than herself. This concerns the problematic of how to exhibit performance work. Do you exhibit it only as visual traces, as photographs or as videos, or do you exhibit it by re-performing them by other bodies? Can the context, intensity, bodily presence or historical moment be captured by doing it again with other performers? It's a contestable approach to exhibiting body art. To re-create the *Sitting / Swaying: Event for Rock Suspension* with any fidelity you would need to perform it in a similar size space, using a body the same kind of rocks counterbalancing a similar weighing body. Certainly a body could physically be suspended in this way. But how much importance do we need to place on the other related details in replicating this as an artwork. The performance was stopped when the telephone rang in the gallery. For the artist this was a significant moment in the unfolding and the concluding of the performance. Not something that can be meaningfully replicated.

*S: Our bodies have a certain lifespan, averaging around 70 -80 years. How has your body evolved as a medium or even material for performance over the years? How do you see the process of aging in terms of your art?*

**Stelarc:** Certainly, an aging body is going to deteriorate, increasingly malfunction and its physical endurance and stamina is going to wane. It is going to have problems with its internal organs or body condition that might not be medically treatable. Body parts might be replaced by artificial components. We see this already today, including some of the most important organs with heart transplants. In fact technology continues to radically interrogate what it means to be human. The turbine heart, a smaller more robust artificial heart circulates the blood in the body continuously without pulsing. So you might rest your head on your loved ones chest, she is warm to the touch, she is breathing, she is certainly alive – but she has no heartbeat!

Because we are living longer, we are experiencing more fully and deeply what it means to deteriorate and malfunction and perhaps lose our memory. Of course, there is interesting research in cell senescence, in studying how cells age. That might result in some increased longevity. But fundamentally, in radical terms, the body is inadequate in the technological terrain in which it now inhabits. The body is empty, alien to its own agency and profoundly obsolete. It is a system that is kept alive by bodily functions that not only guarantee its existence but guarantee its death. We have a sense that there are only a certain number of heartbeats, only a certain amount of breaths we can take. Unless something radically changes with our genetic interventions, we are going to be increasingly experiencing ourselves as aging and malfunctioning bodies. In fact we will no longer die biological deaths, we will die when we switch our life-support systems off.

For most artists, for most philosophers, for most poets, for most academics, remaining in prime physical condition is not a necessity - as long as they can see, as long as they can hear, as long as they can type. But in performance, things are different. If you think of the performing body, if you are a dancer, your body is no longer flexible and coordinated after a certain age, if you are gymnast, after your teenage years you no longer have a body best equipped to adequately perform. Even a singer's voice will eventually deteriorate. This is just a harsh reality of what happens, but we are developing prosthetic attachments and body implants that extend our operational capabilities.

*S: What about internal body feelings, inner bodily perceptions. I see this as evolving with age. I was a part of the Extravagant Bodies exhibit in Zagreb in 2013. It was devoted to the body in old age. Somatic experience changes with age, but not necessarily for loss. If we are somaesthetically attentive, we learn how sense memories accumulate through years of experience. How do you see this idea of an evolving body consciousness with age and what it might mean for you in terms of your performance?*

**Stelarc:** There is no clear and simple answer. Undoubtedly there can be some somatic melioration through the experience of age, but there is also malfunction and loss of coordination of body skills and body parts and numbing of certain sensitivities. Sometimes these can be minimized with technologies that repair or replace. I think we should not be nostalgic about the biological body. Undoubtedly embodiment is fundamental in lived experience. One can argue that the best time to procreate is in your teenage years not in your 30s or 40s, so we can freeze our sperm and eggs until we are ready to have children. If we wait till we are older to have children in the old-fashioned way (with older sperm and eggs), we may be acting irresponsibly we're likely to give birth to children with genetic problems and physical handicaps. Severe operational handicaps can be overcome though. Think of a body like Stephen Hawking's and how it can be technologically equipped for him to continue creative activities. The point I wish to make here is that I am not concerned about the change. We always have to manage these malfunctions. An aging body can still make useful contributions. Fundamentally, to be alive is to be a performative body. If you are concerned about my body's performance, then you only have to worry about it when I am dead ha, ha.

*S: Concerning your transgressive, performance based works, what role has beauty played in them?*

**Stelarc:** Oh, I would assert none! But my projects and performances are situated in the context of art history, so one must accept the consequences of that and the inevitable association that can be made. In framing these projects and performances as art we become complicit in the realm of aesthetics and notions of design and beauty. Certainly there is no deliberate pursuit of a particular aesthetic. I guess one can make associations with the nude body and with a certain form follows function approach to design. But this is not about the beauty of the body, nor the beauty of an object or an installation. Beauty is like Truth - seemingly universal but in actuality somewhat arbitrary. These notions are cultural constructs that are in fact relative, highly contestable and arguably subjective.



9. *Blender*: Stelarc / Nina Sellars. Photographer: Stelarc.

## Endnotes

**Abstract:** *In this dialogue with Stahl Stenslie, Stelarc discusses his use of the body as an artistic material. He explains his own experience from the inside his own performance based artworks, disclosing a unique insight into somaesthetical matters representative of body-based performance art.*

**Keywords:** *body, art, obsolescence, suspension, soma, performance, somaesthetics, pain, exoskeleton, age.*

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