Body Art and Somaesthetics: A Shusterman-Stelarc Dialogue

Richard Shusterman and Stelarc, moderated by Dorota Koczanowicz

Richard Shusterman, The Center for Body, Mind, and Culture at Florida Atlantic University, ORCID: 0000-0002-0467-9781

Stelarc, ORCID: 0009-0005-3532-6742

Dorota Koczanowicz, The University of Wrocław, ORCID: 0000-0001-9419-2573

Introduction:

This dialogue occurred on October 10th, 2023 at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts' Center for Somaesthetics and the Arts. The conversation was between the artist Stelarc and the philosopher and performance artist Richard Shusterman, and it was moderated by Dorota Koczanowicz. This was part of an event that was organized by the Center for Somaesthetics and the Arts at The Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. The conversation has been edited for length and readability. Audience questions have been removed. Images have been provided by Richard Shusterman and Stelarc.

Dorota Koczanowicz:

It seems to me that one of the common grounds of your work is the negation of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. So my first question is: how do you understand what the body is?

Stelarc:

Well, to give a concise idea of what I feel the body is and has become: I think the body is historically an unstable construct. It's socially constructed, historically fashioned, and technologically augmented. I think it's simplistically naïve to imagine that we are merely biological bodies—or that we have ever been purely biological bodies. The body is not seen as a kind of Cartesian subject measuring, monitoring, and evaluating objects in a kind of Cartesian theatre.

For me, there's no distinction between body and mind. In fact, the more performances I do, the less I think I have a mind of my own—nor any mind at all in the traditional metaphysical sense.

Richard Shusterman:

Well, I was never happy about the traditional concept of the body—or even the term "body." That's why somaesthetics was created, and why I prefer to talk about the soma.

The old dominant idea in philosophy—already from Plato but certainly reinforced by Descartes—is the split between body and mind. The idea that the mind is either a prisoner in a tomb or some kind of navigator of a physical ship. So soma was introduced because I wanted to

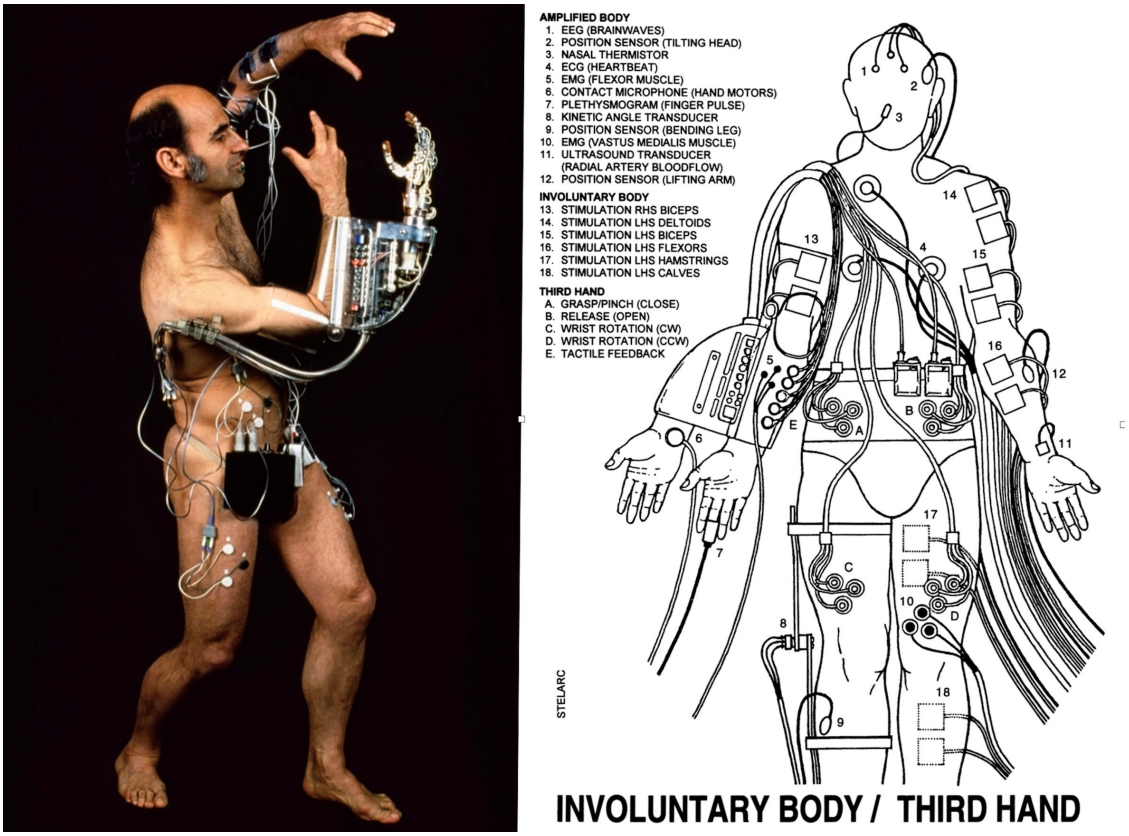
talk about the aesthetics of the body, but the word "body" gave all the wrong directions. It made a somatic approach to aesthetics seem like it was for top models and bodybuilders.

I introduced the term *soma* because I think of the *soma* as an embodied subjectivity—as ontologically one thing in which we can make distinctions, with some predicates that are more physical and others that are more mental. Here, I know I converge with Stelarc: there are lots of experiences—particularly experiences of pain—where it makes absolutely no sense to say, "Oh, my pain is mental," or "my pain is physical." In some performances, that kind of division simply evaporates.

That's why I like the term *soma*, because it doesn't carry all the bad baggage that "body" does. Merleau-Ponty had a term, *flesh*. But we're in a Catholic country—we all know about St. Paul—and the flesh is seen as something negative, something that even corrupts your mind. You can have a fleshly mind, a carnal mind.

The *soma*, by contrast, is something neutral. It allows perhaps a new start. And *soma*—also picking up on what Stelarc said—is always a product of culture. Even from its gestation in the mother's womb, the *soma* is shaped by what the mother eats. It's affected by the music the mother hears. It grows into habits that are determined by the culture in which it grows up.

So the idea of a body—or *soma*—that is somehow independent of culture (and history, since there is no culture without history) is just a chimera.



Third Hand, Stelarc 1980, Tokyo / Yokohama / Nagoya, Composite Image- Photographer: Simon Hunter

Dorota Koczanowicz:

So, the body is the center of your artistic activities. You use the body as a material, as a medium, as a place of experimentation. I'd like to ask: what does this medium convey, and

between which realms does it mediate?

Stelarc:

Well, I guess this body is the convenient expression and actualization of certain ideas. For the artist, ideas are easy—it's the actualizing of the ideas that's difficult. And in a sense, the ideas are authenticated by the artist's actions.

There's a position of seeing the body as a sculptural object interconnected with other objects and other bodies, in a kind of object-oriented, ontological way. In other words, there's no hierarchical position that the body takes. The body, a microphone, an algorithm, a microbe—these all have the same ontological status.

So that's the position this body takes. And when I speak about a body, I mean this physical, phenomenological, interacting, and aware entity in the world. An intelligent agent is one that is embodied but also embedded in the world.

Richard Shusterman:

I understand that artistic sculptural idea and by now I'm not uncomfortable with it. It kind of makes me feel like a brother to Stelarc. But the artistic dimension of somaesthetics, for me personally, came relatively late. It actually grew out of my speaking a lot at art schools in France. The students were genuinely interested—or at least polite enough to pretend they were interested—in what I had to say. But there was always this question: what does somaesthetics do for contemporary art?

I could give them all sorts of explanations, but it didn't satisfy the students. They wanted something practical.

Unfortunately, he was unable to arrive for the event today, but Yann Toma—a professor of art at the Sorbonne—knew I was a philosopher of experience. In French, the word "expérience" has the connotation of experimentation. So he thought I would be willing to get into his father's dance outfit. His father had been the principal male dancer of the Paris Opera Ballet.

Yann has an interest in science, but it's more parascientific. He's very interested in aura and energy—very New Age. He had a project that involved tracing the energies of various subjects. He thought my energy would be much clearer if I wore the gold lycra dance unitard of his father.

I didn't want to disappoint him. I was almost sixty years old at the time, and I didn't think I could get into that lycra suit—either physically or psychologically. But I appreciate my friends, so I tried. I managed to get into it. And then, once I did, we began a still photography session in a style invented by Man Ray—what he called light writing.

The subject has to strike a pose and not move. The camera has a long exposure. Jan would open the shutter, then hurriedly walk by me and trace what he felt was my energy with a lamp, and then return to close the shutter.

The interesting thing is: my energy was a function of his energy, which was also a function of my energy. There's this recursive combination that creates interesting images.

What happened next is that I—being an ex–Tel Aviv beach boy who likes sunshine and not being static—ran out of the studio, which was in a medieval abbey [the Abbey of Royaumont], into the sunlight to talk to the tourists. That's when the project evolved from merely photographic art into performance art. I was no longer a static subject; I was interacting with the outside world, channeling energies, using props and objects around me.

So the body—the *soma*—is central. But the way I understand it is that it's the Man in Gold who is doing the performance. Because the Man in Gold does things that I would never do. You see me now, speaking (hopefully) coherently and intelligently as a philosopher. But the Man in

Gold is silent. He expresses himself in gesture.

And that's something that is a challenge—not so much for art, which is already a gestural form of expression—but for philosophy, which is identified with *logos*, a Greek word meaning both logic and word. So the idea of a philosopher without words is a challenge to philosophy. But it connects me with artists who also express and create and inquire but not always verbally—and those expressions are sometimes far more intelligent than what philosophers express with their *logos*.

So the body, for me, is a place where I can invite a friend—the Man in Gold—to join me in expressing things I could never express in this [verbal, discursive] format.

Image credit: The Man in Gold in 23rd Street Subway Station, March, 2023, New York City, Photographer Yann Toma

Dorota Koczanowicz:

You've started answering my next question already. The next question is about distance and identification. Because in both your works, that seems to be important. You said you are somehow the Man in Gold, but you also write about the Man in Gold as someone else. So at the same time, you embody and accompany him.

There's this interesting tension—you and him. I think something similar appears in Stelarc's work. For example, I thought about *Prosthetic Head*, which appears on a screen and could be seen as a kind of avatar or replacement of the self. So I would like to ask both of you about the relation between the performer and the persona you perform. About that tension between "me" and "him." What is the result of that tension, and how do you construct it?

Stelarc:

Specifically about the *Prosthetic Head*—this was an avatar head: a 3D model of the artist's head, projected five meters high. It had a database and a conversational system. So you could

interrogate the head, ask it questions, and it would respond with real-time lip syncing and facial expressions.

This project began when I kept getting queries from PhD students who wanted to interview me. But sometimes I'm busy or traveling. So I thought—what if I construct a *Prosthetic Head?* Instead of interviewing the artist, they could interview the artist's head.

The head had a lot of information about me in its database. And it was the first project I did using language. Ordinarily, you don't speak when you make art. But this installation used language, and it had to be reasonably seductive—reasonably convincing. If you asked the head a question, it had to respond adequately and appropriately.

Sometimes the head sounded especially intelligent. Sometimes it sounded rather stupid. Kind of like the artist himself.

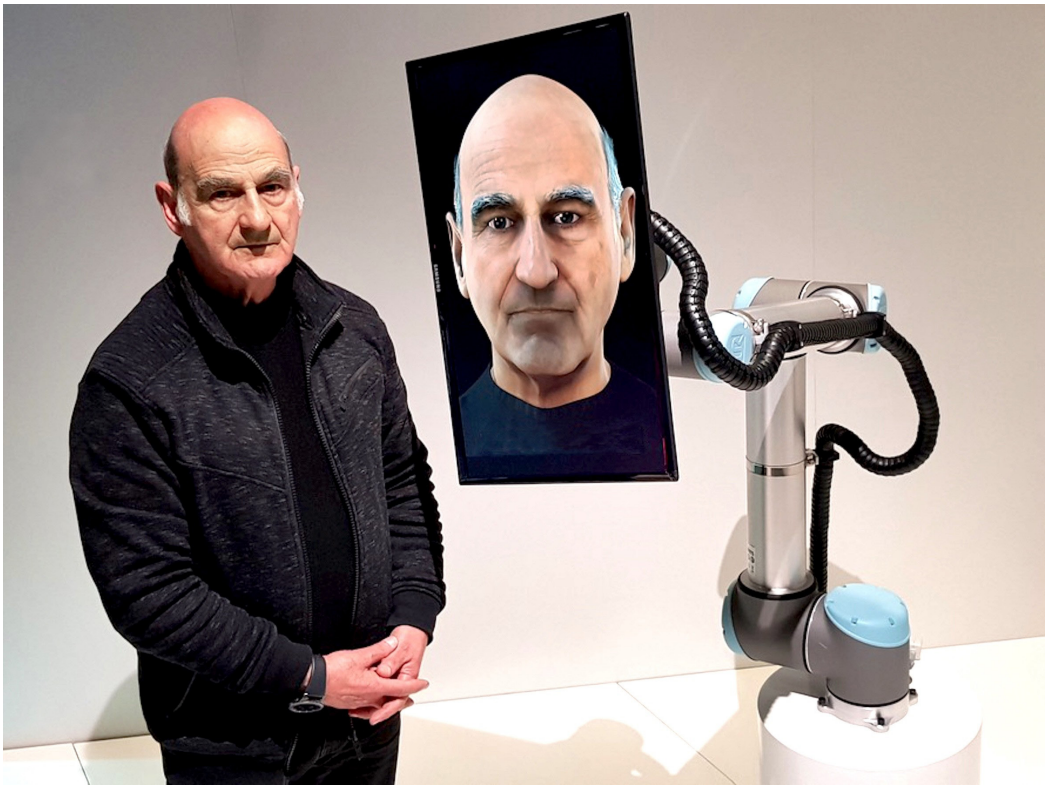


Image credit: Articulated Head, Stelarc / Herath / Kroos 2019, Questacon, Canberra 2019 Photographer Damith Herath

I think it was a successful project. But I also think the dilemma you're pointing to is very real—for performative philosophers or artists who speak. There needs to be a distinction between concept and action. There may be feedback loops between the two, but I never think of my performances as illustrating ideas.

If I say that the human body is now a contemporary chimera of meat, metal, and code, I'm not saying the performances illustrate that. The idea is generated by the performance, but it doesn't belong to the action. As Richard said, when he's performing, he finds his body enacting in a very different situation than when he speaks as a philosopher.

Richard Shusterman:

That's right. And I think there's another dimension to this distance: the Man in Gold needs more than myself to appear. He needs Yann, because Yann is the one who has, keeps, and takes

care of the golden skin. I would never engage with the Man in Gold without Yann.

There's a message in that. One of the ideas we traditionally have about ourselves is that we are autonomous individuals—independent from others. Especially in Western countries and under capitalism, there's this pride in being individuals with freedom—freedom to buy things, to choose, to be self-reliant. Part of the Man in Gold project is to question that. He doesn't exist without Yann. He would never have existed without Yann. So there's that layer of dependency and collaboration.

Plus, you know, the Man in Gold doesn't talk. Where there is an overlap is that he relies on my body for his existence. But—and without pushing this too far into psychoanalysis or psychiatry—though I will be speaking to the Polish Psychiatric Society in the city of Wroclaw on Friday—I think many of us have within us different personalities that take over. It doesn't have to be bipolar disorder or multiple personality in a clinical sense. But we have different perceptions and personalities that emerge through our single body.

Image credit: The Man in Gold on Battery Park Pier, October, 2022, New York City, Photographer Yann Toma

We also have different bodily habits depending on the roles we play. A female police officer who is also a mother behaves bodily in very different ways when handling a baby than when dealing with a criminal. Artists who rock climb, for example, might move differently when performing art versus climbing. So part of this work with the Man in Gold is loosening the simplicity of what a *soma* is—and dealing with its complexity.

As a *soma*, we can investigate one part of the body with another part. For instance, I can feel a bump on my face with my finger. My finger, in that act, becomes an embodied subjectivity, touching my *soma* as an object. That's one of the core ideas of somaesthetics: the *soma* is both

subject and object.

Our bodies exist in the world as objects—like Stelarc said earlier, the body is like other objects—but also as subjectivities that are aware of those objects, including themselves. When I look at my hand, I see part of my body as an object, though I am the subject observing it. Much of Stelarc's robotic work plays with that switching of perspective—from object to subject. The extended body part can be something very mechanical—or something subtle, like a contact lens. You don't even notice it, yet it's part of that extended body.

So the *soma* is not simple. These experiments—of coming in and going out of oneself—connect with Helmut Plessner's concept of *eccentric positionality*. You can stand apart from your body, or be fully immersed in it. And I think both the Man in Gold and Stelarc's work deal with that—being in and being out.

Stelarc:

Just to add to that, I was thinking—while you were speaking—about Graham Harman's definition of an object. He riffs on Arthur Eddington's idea that there are two kinds of tables: the scientific table, which is really just vibrating atoms, and the manifest table that we subjectively experience—something solid, with a surface, that can hold things.

What Harman adds is a third table. In his theory, an object can neither be reduced to its physical components nor entirely understood through its effects or relations. Rather, it's something *other*, something partially inaccessible. You can never exhaust what an object *is*—neither through scientific observation nor through subjective experience.

The other thing you alluded to is *distancing*. And now, proximity itself is becoming less relevant. We are not just biological bodies performing offline. We are also bodies performing online. That means we can project our physical presence to remote locations.

Image credit: Ear On Arm, Stelarc 2006, London / Los Angeles / Melbourne, Photographer Nina Sellars

Intimacy now is not just a result of being physically close. You can have intimacy without proximity—without skin contact. This challenges what we mean by presence and absence. Absence can be a double presence. And all presence can be a double absence. We're neither

entirely here nor entirely elsewhere. We appear as flickering images online, distributed across many places. So proximity is no longer an issue when it comes to intimacy.

Dorota Koczanowicz:

Let's continue with the body and technology. On one hand, technology allows us to transcend the body's limits. But in this situation, is the body somehow undermined by technology? And should we be afraid of technology—especially now, with all the discussions around artificial intelligence?

Richard Shusterman:

Let's see. My own artistic work, in some ways, uses very little technology—except for the suit. On the other hand, it really wouldn't have existed without cameras, electric lights, and movie equipment. Those were facilitators—or as Gibson would say, affordances. I wouldn't have opened myself up to the energy of the Man in Gold without those props that created the right atmosphere.

Also, if there weren't an art world, the Man in Gold would make no sense. The costume is from ballet, my partner is an artist and professor of art, and the whole idea of performance comes out of that context. Though I'm not particularly fond of the term "performance"—it's more like an event, as Stelarc might say, or a happening. Something that just happens without a script or a specific venue.

So the artistic work has an ambiguous relationship to technology. Now there are films and photographs that wouldn't exist without it, of course. But somaesthetics has actually attracted a lot of interest from the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) community—because people want products that are user-friendly. One way to think about that is to consider what's *somatically* friendly.

I do a lot of workshops with people in that field. One of them, Dag Svanæs from the Norwegian Institute for Science and Technology, also knows Stelarc. We've both worn Dag's "tail"—a computerized body extension that's like the long tail of an animal. It has sensors, and the movement of your hips and bottom sends signals to wave the tail.

The tail is heavy enough that you really feel it in your hips and bottom, and that, in turn, affects your body. These kinds of robotic or technological extensions are becoming more present—and more popular.

Now, people our age—and your age—still learn to do things the old way. We think of proximity in terms of physical distance. But proximity can also be understood as what's *familiar* or *close to you*. Our habits are close to us. New generations of humans are learning new habits.

For example, when we learned to read and turn a page, we'd go like this (*gestures flipping a physical page*). But children who grow up with screens—they do this (*gestures swiping on a touchscreen*). I remember giving a book to one of my grandchildren, and he didn't know how to turn the page—he tried to swipe it.

It's actually easier to swipe like this (*gestures swiping left/right*) than like this (*gestures swiping upward*). One Chinese smartphone had an upward swipe function, but it didn't work well—people found it somatically uncomfortable. There are limits in our anatomy that constrain how we can interact comfortably with technology.

Actually, Stelarc can talk about this—his work with robots often involves machines moving him through sensors and communication. But there are limits. The robot could destroy you. So maybe he can speak about that—especially the exhibit downstairs where you [*gesturing to*

Stelarc] have to balance on one leg. There are limits to what the robot can do before it harms you.

Stelarc:

Yes, well—first, as a preface to what Richard mentioned: as a person with only half a brain, I need all the artificial intelligence augmentation I can get! I think artificial intelligence, machine learning, large language models—none of this has happened all of a sudden. AI was being researched back in the 1960s. But it didn't develop much back then because researchers realized you couldn't create truly intelligent systems that were merely computational. Intelligence needed embodiment.

So from artificial intelligence, we moved toward artificial life. If you release a simple robot into a complex, real-world environment, that robot—with only a few sensors—can learn to avoid obstacles or follow a human by sensing their body heat, for example. I think AI will augment and accelerate some of our functions. It's useful. I don't have a dystopian view of AI suddenly taking over. These projects and performances aren't meant to enhance the human body, but to experiment with alternative anatomical architectures. How does the body perform with a third hand? Or with an extended arm? How does the body walk with six legs? The relationship with technology is conditional—it's not simplistically "enhancing." It's always ambivalent and needs to be contestable. There's no definitive enhancement that's universally valid.

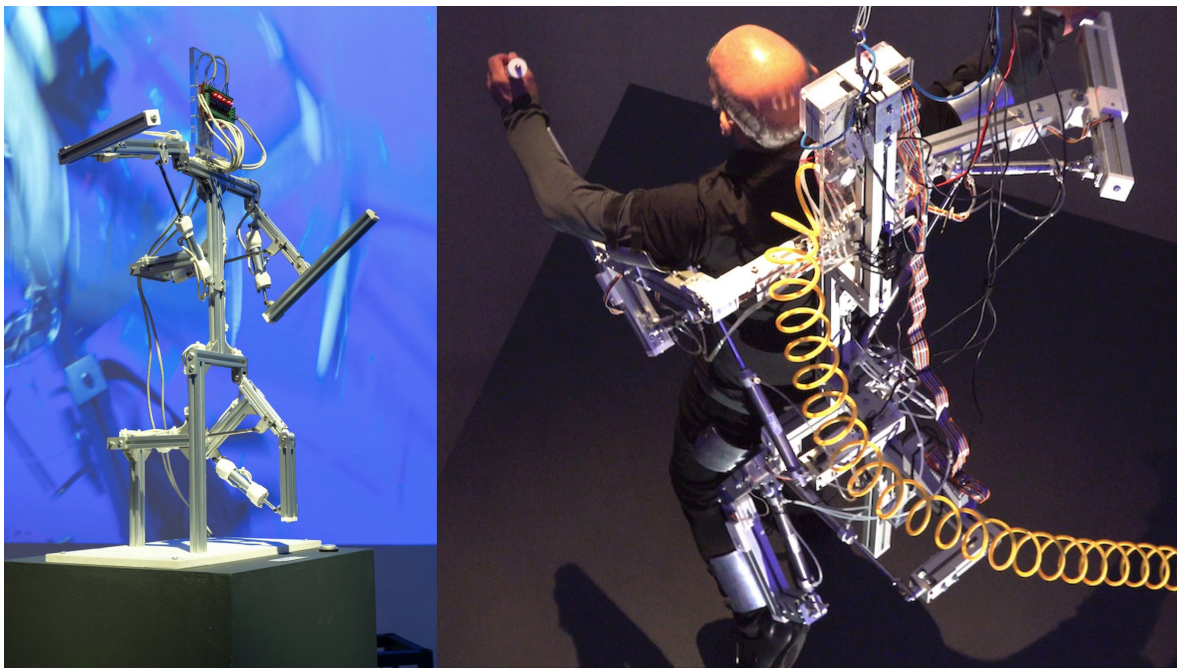


Image credit: StickMan / miniStickMan, Stelarc 2022, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, Composite Video Still

For example, the exoskeleton Richard mentioned was part of a five-hour performance. My body was algorithmically actuated by a six-degree-of-freedom exoskeleton. I had one leg to balance on. On one hand, I could pivot and control the shadow on one wall; on the other hand, I could turn and control the video feedback on the opposite wall. But during all of this, two of my limbs and one leg were being actuated by the exoskeleton. So it was a possessed and performing body—a body controlled by the machine, but still with some agency to complete the aesthetic experience.

Richard Shusterman:

And that's a perfect example—one reason I brought it up—of the limited agency and autonomy we have with our bodies. We still haven't figured out how to live forever. We get hip replacements, knee replacements, heart surgeries. I have a colleague who just had a procedure to stop sleep apnea, where your tongue can cover your glottis and suffocate you. Now, there's a sensor that detects when your tongue stays in that position too long. It sends a signal to a nerve that makes your tongue stick out—so you can breathe again.

If it goes wrong, you may have someone sticking their tongue out mid-speech—but it ensures survival. And the procedure takes about an hour—it's an outpatient procedure. So, we have these amazing advancements. But part of our somatic heritage is recognizing limits. With all these affordances, there are also constraints. When we consider climate change, famine, and overpopulation, we start to think that maybe the fact that our bodies are mortal is not such a bad thing after all.

Part of this work on the *soma* is not about idolizing the body, like Greek sculpture did. It's about recognizing our limits and mortality. On one hand, people may view body-based art as egotistical or self-centered. But on the other hand, it's often about showing human vulnerability—acknowledging it and affirming it. We suffer, and we learn. That ambivalence—the tension between suffering and insight—is part of the human condition. It's better to embrace it. And it's also been a source of artistic energy for millennia—energy that helps us overcome those very limits.

Stelarc:

And to add to that, we have to remember that with every new generation, we're essentially rebooting—we're bootstrapping our species. Each generation introduces a new series of genetic variations that animate bodies in different ways and generate ideas we might not have encountered before. So while the idea of longevity or immortality might be seductive on an individual level, from the perspective of the human species, that's not how it works. Each new generation brings with it a range of genetic and qualitative capabilities that weren't necessarily experienced by the previous one.

Dorota Koczanowicz:

In academia, we now have a new methodology called art-based research. I'd like to ask about your approach to the epistemic possibilities of art. For example, you examine the boundaries of the body and put the body in sometimes dangerous positions in order to know or discover something. In some cases, your work seems closely connected to science. So what can we get to know from artistic experience? And what is the difference, for example, between artistic research and scientific or philosophical research?

Richard Shusterman:

That's a very good question. My artistic work actually challenges that distinction. With the Man in Gold, it's not always clear—is it art or is it life? This work is not usually performed in an artistic venue (I recall only two exceptional occasions). It has no script. It has, however, documentation that's been exhibited in museums and galleries. So it exists in this fuzzy space, which is a fascinating space for a philosopher.

But to get closer to your question: is it art done by a philosopher, or is it philosophical research in aesthetic experience—through the medium of art? Again, it's impossible to say. Is it

artistic research, or is it research in aesthetics by a philosopher? That's why this kind of project is exciting. The French have a term—*partager*—which means both to share and to divide. Most of our understanding of the world comes through dualisms. Gender, for example—male and female. But lots of things, including gender, don't fall into such neat binaries.

We also divide art and reality, philosophy and art. But those boundaries are often artificial. This kind of work shows that beneath those divisions there's continuity. And sometimes, the boundaries are arbitrary.

If we're talking epistemology—what have I learned from working with the Man in Gold? I've learned that my body can and will do things I never knew it could or would do. Of course, I also learn new movement patterns—because his movements are different from mine. Sometimes, he is running from menacing people or embarrassing situations, even from the police.

I've had political run-ins with the police in my life—but never those other kinds that I've had with the Man in Gold. So yes, I learn new things. Ethically speaking—but also epistemologically—I learn about my own limits: what, for instance, I'm comfortable doing and what I'm not. But one thing I'm sure Stelarc can speak to: you learn a lot through discomfort. Most of our learning is sparked by discomfort. Even something as simple as navigating an unfamiliar city: do I turn left, or right? (*mimes a left/right turn*). If I'm confident, I don't have to think about it. But doubt—the discomfort of doubt—is what spurs inquiry. The pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce said that doubt is the source of all inquiry. If we're comfortable, we don't think about other ways of doing things. I know that Stelarc has learned from discomfort. Some of it extreme.

Stelarc:

Yes. And sometimes people don't realize what's actually difficult. The most difficult project for me wasn't a suspension performance, which is mostly about external pain. It was the stomach sculpture. That was a simple machine inserted into my stomach. Inside the body, it opens and closes, extends and retracts. It has a flashing light and a beeping sound. It's a simple choreography of a machine inside the body. That was far more difficult to endure than suspension. When you're gagging, feeling sick, wanting to throw up—it's an entirely different kind of discomfort. And yes, that discomfort generates new experiences, new ambivalences, new sensitivities.

Now, going back to the question of art and science: I feel very uncomfortable with the simplistic meshing of those two, which is quite common these days. It often feels institutionally driven. Institutions don't know what to do with artistic practice, so they try to authenticate it by attaching scientific labels or purposes.

But art and science operate with different methodologies and goals. Scientific research is often very focused, very reductive, iterative—it gathers information to improve prediction. Those are standard scientific strategies. An artist doesn't think that way. Artists don't create or perform using the same logic. We also have to distinguish between *science* and *technology*. Artists use technology. They hack it. If they use science, it's often in a trivial or metaphorical way. I don't think we should call what artists do "research" in the same sense as scientific research. I get very upset about this. Even though my work often gets categorized as "sci-art" or "art-science," I find that discourse very problematic.

Richard Shusterman:

I think one of the problems is that "art" is a big word—and there are lots of very different artistic practices. "Science" is also a big word. In Anglophone cultures, we tend to identify science with natural science or STEM disciplines. But in German—or even French—*science*

includes history, philosophy, the humanities. In German, it's *Wissenschaft*. Philosophy is a science. History is a science. So these are all research domains, but not in the same sense as laboratory science. It becomes impossible to universally define what art is or what science is, or how they relate. Even the word *research* extends from simple curiosity to complex grant-funded investigations.

One question I think is worth raising—especially since we're in an academic art institution—is whether academies of fine art should have PhDs. I'm not saying they shouldn't. But I know there are debates with strong views on both sides of this issue. A dear friend of mine, who used to be the rector of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, believed it was actually *bad* for art to adopt a university model—with its focus on academic journals, hierarchical ranks like associate professor or full professor, and so on. That kind of institutionalization works against the romantic idea of the artist as a free, creative, non-bourgeois figure.

In philosophy, there's no escaping the academy. But I know artists who refuse academic jobs because they feel those positions conflict with what being an artist should mean—particularly in terms of freedom.