

Parasite Visions

Alternate, Intimate and Involuntary Experiences

Stelarc



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Introduction

In previous actions the body has performed with technology attached (the Third Hand — actuated with EMG signals), technology inserted (the Stomach Sculpture — a self-illuminating, sound-emitting, opening/closing, extending and retracting mechanism operating in the stomach cavity) and Net-connected (the body becoming accessed and remotely activated by people in other places). The body has been augmented, invaded and now becomes a host — not only for technology, but also for remote agents. Just as the Internet provides extensive and interactive ways of displaying, linking and retrieving information and images, it may now allow unexpected ways of accessing, interfacing and uploading the body itself. And instead of seeing the Internet as a means of fulfilling outmoded metaphysical desires of disembodiment, it offers on the contrary powerful individual and collective strategies for projecting body presence and extruding body awareness. The Internet does not hasten the disappearance of the body and the dissolution of the self — rather it generates new collective physical couplings and a telematic scaling of subjectivity. Such a body's authenticity will not be due to the coherence of its individuality but rather to its multiplicity of collaborating agents. What becomes important is not merely the body's identity, but its connectivity — not its mobility or location, but its interface...

Surface and self: The Shedding of Skin

As a surface, skin was once the beginning of the world and simultaneously the boundary of the self. But now stretched, pierced and penetrated by technology, the skin is no longer the smooth and sensuous surface of a site or a screen. Skin no longer signifies closure. The rupture of surface and skin means the erasure of inner and outer. An artwork has been inserted inside the body. The Stomach Sculpture — constructed for the Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennale in Melbourne, whose theme was site-specific work — was inserted 40 cm into the stomach cavity. Not as a prosthetic implant but as an aesthetic addition. The body becomes hollow — not the BWO but rather a body with art. The body is experienced as hollow with no meaningful distinctions between public, private and physiological spaces. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self but simply for a sculpture. As interface, the skin is obsolete. The significance of the cyber may well reside in the act of the body shedding its skin. The clothing of the body with membranes and embedded in them alternate sensory and input/output devices creates the possibility of more intimate and enhanced interactivity. Subjectively, the body experiences itself as a more extruded system, rather than an enclosed structure. The self becomes situated beyond the skin. It is partly through this extrusion that the body becomes

empty. But this emptiness is not through a lack but from the extrusion and extension of its capabilities, its new sensory antennae and its increasingly remote functioning ...



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Fractal Flesh

Consider a body that can extrude its awareness and action into other bodies or bits of bodies in other places. An alternate operational entity that is spatially distributed but electronically connected. A movement that you initiate in Melbourne would be displaced and manifested in another body in Rotterdam. A shifting, sliding awareness that is neither "all-here" in this body nor "all-there" in those bodies. This is not about a fragmented body but a multiplicity of bodies and parts of bodies prompting and remotely guiding each other. This is not about master-slave control mechanisms but feedback loops of alternate awareness, agency and of split physiologies. Imagine one side of your body being remotely guided whilst the other side could collaborate with a local agency. You watch a part of your body move but you have neither initiated it nor are you contracting your muscles to produce it. Imagine the consequences and advantages of being a split body with voltage-in, inducing the behaviour of a remote agent and voltage-out of your body to control peripheral devices. This would be a more complex and interesting body — not simply a single entity with one agency but one that would be a host for a multiplicity of remote and alien agents — of different physiologies and in varying locations. Certainly there may be justification, in some situations and for particular actions, to tele-operate a human arm rather than a robot manipulator — for if the task is to be performed in a non-hazardous location, then it might be an advantage to use a remote human arm — as it would be attached to another arm and a mobile, intelligent body. Consider a task begun by a body in one place, completed by another body in another place. Or the transmission and conditioning of a skill. The body not as a site of inscription but as a medium for the manifestation of remote agents. This physically split body may have one arm gesturing involuntarily (remotely actuated by an unknown agent), whilst the other arm is enhanced by an exoskeleton prosthesis to perform with exquisite skill and with extreme speed. A body capable of incorporating movement that from moment t to moment would be a pure mechanic motion performed with neither memory nor desire ...

Stimbod

What makes this possible is a touch-screen muscle stimulation system. A method has been developed that enables the body's movements to be programmed by touching the muscle sites on the computer model. Orange flesh maps the possible stimulation sites whilst red flesh indicates the actuated muscle(s). The sequence of motions can be replayed continuously with its loop function. As well as choreography by pressing, it is possible to paste sequences

together from a library of gesture icons. The system allows stimulation of the programmed movement for analysis and evaluation before transmission to actuate the body. At a lower stimulation level it is a body prompting system. At a higher stimulation level it is a body actuation system. This is not about remote control of the body, but rather of constructing bodies with split physiologies, operating with multiple agency. Was it Wittgenstein who asked if in raising your arm you could remove the intention of raising it, what would remain? Ordinarily, you would associate intention with action (except, perhaps in an instinctive motion — or if you have a pathological condition like Parkinson's disease). With Stimbod, though, that intention would be transmitted from another body elsewhere. There would be actions without expectations. A two-way tele-Stimbod system would create a possessed and possessing body — a split physiology to collaborate and perform tasks remotely initiated and locally completed — at the same time in the one physiology ...

Extreme absence and the experience of the alien

Such a Stimbod would be hollow body, a host body for the projection and performance of remote agents. Glove Anaesthesia and Alien Hand are pathological conditions in which the patient experiences parts of their body as not there, as not their own, as not under their own control — an absence of physiology on the one hand and an absence of agency on the other. In a Stimbod not only would it possess a split physiology but it would experience parts of itself as automated, absent and alien. The problem would no longer be possessing a split personality, but rather a split physicality. In our Platonic, Cartesian and Freudian pasts these might have been considered pathological and in our Foucauldian present we focus on inscription and control of the body. But in the terrain of cyber complexity that we now inhabit the inadequacy and the obsolescence of the ego-agent driven biological body cannot be more apparent. A transition from psycho-body to cybersystem becomes necessary to function effectively and intuitively in remote spaces, speeded-up situations and complex technological terrains. During a Sexuality and Medicine Seminar in Melbourne, Sandy Stone asked me what would be the cyber-sexual implications of the Stimbod system? Not having thought about it before, I tried to explain what it might be like. If I was in Melbourne and Sandy was in NY, my touching my chest would prompt her to caress her breast. Someone observing her there would see it as an act of self-gratification, as a masturbatory act. She would know though that her hand was remotely and perhaps even divinely guided! Given tactile and force-feedback, I would feel my touch via another person from another place as a secondary and additional sensation. Or, by feeling my chest I can also feel her breast. An intimacy through interface, an intimacy without proximity. Remember that Stimbod is not merely a sensation of touch but an actuation system. Can a body cope with experiences of extreme absence and alien action without becoming overcome by outmoded metaphysical fears and obsessions of individuality and free agency? A Stimbod would thus need to experience its actuality neither all-present-in-this-body, nor all-present-in-that-body, but partly-here and projected-partly-there. An operational system of spatially distributed but electronically interfaced clusters of bodies ebbing and flowing in awareness, augmented by alternate and alien agency ...



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Ping Body / Proto-Parasite

In 1995 for Telepolis, people at the Pompidou Centre (Paris), the Media Lab (Helsinki) and the Doors of Perception conference (Amsterdam), were able to remotely access and actuate this body in Luxembourg, using the touch-screen interfaced muscle stimulation system. ISDN Pictoretel links allowed the body to see the face of the person who was moving it whilst the programmers could observe their remote choreography. Although people thought they were merely activating the body's limbs, they were inadvertently composing the sounds that were heard and the images of the body they were seeing — for the body had sensors, electrodes, and transducers on its legs, arms, and head that triggered sampled body signals and sounds and that also made the body a video switcher and mixer. And although people in other places were performing with the RHS of the body, it could respond by actuating its Third Hand, voltage-out from electrodes positioned on its abdominal and LHS leg muscles. This Split Body then was manifesting a combination of involuntary — remotely guided, improvised, and EMG (muscle-initiated motor motions). In Ping Body — an Internet Actuated and Uploaded Performance, (performed first for Digital Aesthetics in Sydney, but also for DEAF in Rotterdam in 1996) — instead of the body being prompted by other bodies in other places, Internet activity itself choreographs and composes the performance. Random pinging to over 30 global Internet domains produce values from 0—2,000 milliseconds that are mapped to the deltoid, biceps, flexors, hamstring, and calf muscles — 0—60 volts initiating involuntary movements. The movements of the body are amplified, with a midi interface measuring position, proximity and bending angle of limbs. Activated by Internet data the body is uploaded as info and images to a Web site to be viewed by other people elsewhere. The body is telematically scaled-up, stimulated and stretched by reverberating signals of an inflated spatial and electrical system. The usual relationship with the Internet is flipped — instead of the Internet being constructed by the input from people, the Internet constructs the activity of one body. The body becomes a nexus for Internet activity — its activity a statistical construct of computer networks.

Parasite: Event for invaded and involuntary Body

A customized search engine has been constructed that scans, selects and displays images to the body — which functions in an interactive video field. Analyses of the JPEG files provide data that is mapped to the body via the muscle stimulation system. There is optical and electrical input into the body. The images that you see are the images that move you.

Consider the body's vision, augmented and adjusted to a parallel virtuality that increases in intensity to compensate for the twilight of the real world. Imagine the search engine selecting

images of the body off the WWW, constructing a metabody that in turn moves the physical body. Representations of the body actuate the body's physiology. The resulting motion is mirrored in a VRML space at the performance site and also uploaded to a Web site as potential and recursive source images for body reactivation. RealAudio sound is inserted into sampled body signals and sounds generated by pressure, proximity, flexion and accelerometer sensors. The body's physicality provides feedback loops of interactive neurons, nerve endings, muscles, transducers and Third Hand mechanism. The system electronically extends the body's optical and operational parameters beyond its cyborg augmentation of its Third Hand and other peripheral devices. The prosthesis of the Third Hand is counterpointed by the prosthesis of the search engine software code. Plugged-in, the body becomes a parasite sustained by an extended, external and virtual nervous system. Parasite was first performed for Virtual World Orchestra in Glasgow. It has also been presented for The Studio for Creative Inquiry, Carnegie Mellon University at the Wood Street Galleries in Pittsburgh and for Festival Atlantico in Lisbon ...



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Phantom Bodies and Collective Strategies

Previously connection and communication with other bodies on the Internet was only textual, with an acute absence of physical presence. This was not the experience of authentic evolved absence that results in an effectively operating body in the real world — absence of the body on the Internet is an absence of inadequacy, that is an inadequacy of appropriate feedback loops. 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. It will only be through the construction of phantoms that the equivalent of our evolved absence will be experienced, as we function increasingly powerfully and with speed and intuition (a successful body operates automatically). Bodies must now perform in techno-terrains and data structures beyond the human scale where intention and action collapse into accelerated responses. Bodies acting without expectation, producing movements without memory. Can a body act without emotion? Must a body continuously affirm its emotional, social and biological status quo? Or perhaps what is necessary is electronic erasure with new intimate, internalized interfaces to allow for the design of a body with more adequate inputs and outputs for performance and awareness augmented by search engines. Imagine a body

remapped and reconfigured — not in genetic memory but rather in electronic circuitry. What of a body that is intimately interfaced to the WWW — and that is stirred and is startled by distant whispers and remote promptings of other bodies in other places. A body that is informed by spiders, knowbots and phantoms ...

Operational Internet/ Intelligent System

Consider the Internet structured so that it would scan, select and switch automatically interfacing clusters of on-line bodies in real time (the size and expertise of the clusters selected for the task to be performed). Can a body cope with the multiplicity of agents — a fluid and flowing awareness that dims and intensifies as agents are connected and disconnected? Awareness and agency would be shifted and shared in an electronic space of distributed intelligence. The Internet becomes not merely a means of information transmission, but a mode of transduction — affecting physical action between bodies. Electronic space as a realm of action, rather than information. Imagine a body that is open and aware, invaded, augmented and with extended operation. Consider a body whose awareness is extruded by surrogate robots in situations and spaces where no body could go. These machines with arrays of sensors, manipulators and hybrid locomotion would exponentially multiply the operational possibilities — scaling up the subtlety, speed and complexity of human action. Perhaps what it means to be human is about not retaining our humanity ...