

The Significance of a Body in Contemporary Arts

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role and significance of a body in Performance Art. Considering that Art reflects social, cultural and sometimes political realities, we identify types of messages that an artwork using advanced technological might transmit to us, spectators or artists. This paper focusses on the Cyborg Theatre, whereby the technology is its inherent element without which the performance could not happen. Such a technological performance cannot occur without a body. We refer here to a cyborg body as a human organism extended with mechanical parts, which integrate non organic components in order to gain meaning within the artwork. By focusing on such a theatrical performance, we observe a relationship developing between the performer and the spectator. This is an unusual interaction, which deserves our attention. We claim that both the performer and the spectator take part in a social event that does not only represent societal realities, but also indicates future ones.

Keywords: creative/affective experiences, creative robots, creative technologies, creative user experience, digital art, visualization

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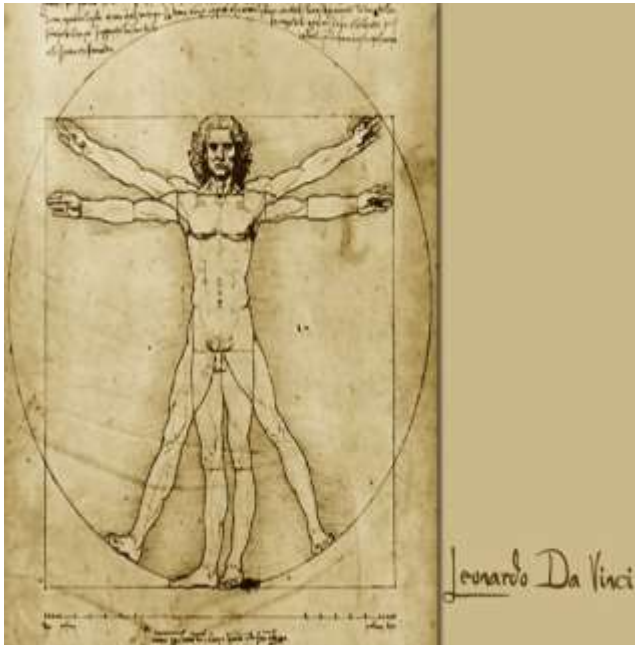
1. Introduction: Towards a contemporary body

We searched in the dictionary for the interpretation or description of the word body and we found the following description: "...noun, neutral, an organism, skin with material substance, ...in contradiction to the spirit or soul, a material object, an organized group of people who meet for a specific purpose ... " [1]. Without trying to judge the above definition, it would be useful to note that there is a clear distinction among the body as an organism, spirit and psychological entity in this approach. It seems that descriptions, which define the body, vary depending on the scholar and his/her point of view. Similarly, it should be noted that the way we understand the body as an entity defers according to the times that we refer to (Figure 1).

The Greeks '*glorified*' and honoured the naked human body. They created a big variety of artworks in which beauty and aesthetics were elements of great importance. Plato believed that a beautiful body resembles the first step towards the Absolute Beauty and towards God. At the same time, he

described the body as a tomb of the soul. However, is the physical pleasure better than the intellectual one? This question was discussed since the ancient times. In some cases people come to conclusions, which praised the physical, carnal pleasure over the intellectual one (i.e. the hedonistic philosophy of Aristippus). In other cases, they incriminated the flesh as an obstacle or prison of the soul, which distracts humans and acts as a hindrance to the truth. Philosophers like René Descartes (1596-1650) considered body as a machine and others like Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) praised the beauty as something sacred, as a sign of inner kindness. By making good and beautiful to look like they are identical, Castiglione emphasized on the importance of the human body. He talked about a coalescence of a body with a soul, a merger of both physical and moral beauties respectively. During renaissance times it was the beginning of an end of the perception that the body is an "enemy" of the spirit, while the idea of a beautiful, good and personal, in terms of private, and started gaining more significance. In general, it seems that the need to separate the mind and the soul from the body continues for a long time. Probably this will persist until humans accept the fact that they die.

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(a)



(b)

Figure 1. Vitruvius Man (a) by Leonardo Da Vinci [6] and Gordon Freeman (b) by Dave Eames [7]

This approach possibly explains why philosophers like Descartes tried to define the survival of the soul over the body's death with mathematical precision. For Descartes bodies are almost identical to machines. He argued that although bodies are beings or entities, they include geometrical properties, their functions are vital and they are connected to natural and organic foundations. Here we should mention that for Descartes, the Mind is not the beginning of life, but the beginning of intelligence [2]. If the vital part dies, the Mind can survive the death of the body. It seems that in this way he ensures, or believes that he ensures, the eternal life. In order to strengthen such a position, he "removed life" from the body by degrading it into a machine, whose internal drives do not differ from those of any automaton. Therefore, he claims that the body "works" in the same exactly way as the self-moving objects.

"I should like you to consider ... all the functions I have ascribed to this machine such as the digestion of food, the beating of the heart and the arteries, the nourishment and growth of the limbs, respiration ... I should like you to consider that these functions follow from the mere arrangements of the machine's organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangements of its counterweights and wheels. In order to explain these functions, then, it is not necessary to conceive of this machine as having any vegetative or sensate soul or other principle of movement and life, apart from its blood and its spirits, which are agitated by the heat of the fire burning continuously in its heart--a fire which has the same nature as all the fires that occur in inanimate bodies" [3].

Theories similar to the one above probably have their roots in the history of Christianity, which separated the physical entity of the body from the spiritual one in order to answer

unexplainable facts or mysteries, or anything that might cause the fear of an unknown. Ultimately, which body should we prefer, the natural one or the spiritual one? What is a natural and what is a spiritual body? Saint Paul enlightens the Corinthians as follows:

"This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised it will be immortal. When buried, it is ugly and weak; when raised it will be beautiful and strong. When buried it is a physical body; when raised it will be a spiritual body. Corinthians 15:35-6, 42-4)" [4].

Before we select the body of our choice and we present or represent it as an artwork, let us consider the possibility that the mind and body might belong to one another. Let us consider the option that one cannot exist without the other one. They are united, they satisfy and 'serve' each other.

Relations among Body, Art and Society

Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud not only suggested that the body and spirit are the same, but they also affirm that there is a direct dependence of one on another. Freud confirmed this by treating the psychological problems in order to cure the physical ones forever [5]. This fact suggests that there is a direct relationship between the body, the soul and the spirit. On the other hand, Herbert Read argues that the term "Art" should be reserved for those practices that are fundamental and related to the actual biology of the human body (Read, 2002: xiii). In this instance, we could claim that if the body is paramount to the human existence, the Art is a mirror of our real life. Taking into account that our realities usually depend on the societies that we belong to, we define things according to our times and their values. Real life is not always

characterized by harmony and balance. Sometimes there are discrepancies and imbalances. Although these elements differ from one person to another and they differ according to their times, they have something in common: they both reflect on a human body.

We may observe, in a humorous way that, as Leonardo da Vinci tried to describe the ideal proportions of a human body in the late 15th century, Dave Eames presented his own aesthetic approach of the 20th century perfect man (Figure 1). Eventually, the space and time in which art belongs can create diversities that they deserve our attention. These diversities can characterize new societies or create new epochs. Arts and their communities are changing ways of expressing themselves, according to new demands. They alter the way of perceiving ideas over several things, following the evolution of the eras. However, evolution, an overused term, changes its meaning over the years as well. It is not a surprise

that the body, which is the main medium of the Performing Arts, changes hypostasis or substance through time. It follows the changes not only as a material or a living organism, but also as a mental entity, which is a part of a society. We should admit that each society or community has its own cultural and political characteristics. Both characteristics can influence each other and create the human mentality, which in the end would be expressed through Art (as in Figure1).

2. The cyborg body

In modern technological societies, Performing Arts follows adapt, assimilate and sometimes suggest new bodies, which will join new worlds, referring to our contemporary visions.

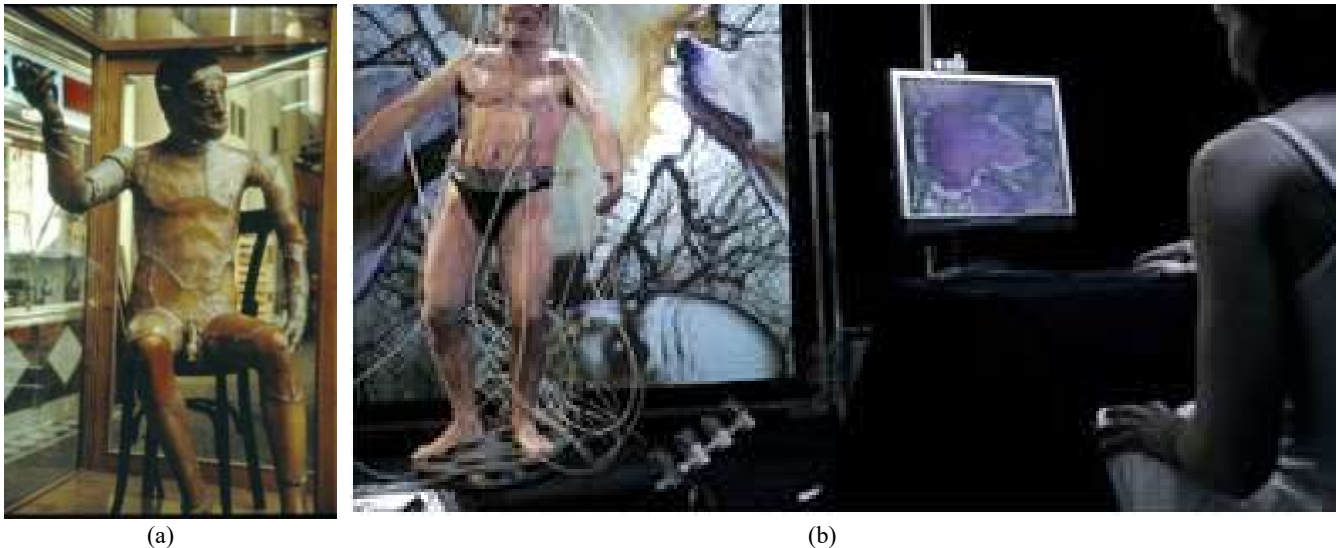


Figure 2. JoAn 1992 (a), Epizoo 1994 (b)

Marcel-li Antunez Roca created an installation project entitled *JoAn* (Figure 2a) and *The Man of Flesh* (1992). The technical means used in this project included: Apple Macintosh Classic II, an electric motor, polyester and pigskin dummy, software Max, sound analyser with a digitizing card, MIDI decoder prototype and a cabin for the creature.

It was a construction of a humanoid, a being that resembled a modern golem. This golem was as big as a man was and created with a real pigskin. The hands of this creature, his head and his penis were sensitive to sounds created by the public. In this way, *JoAn* could respond to any voice, sound or noise of the spectator. It is striking that a body was created from dead, previous live, materials and was installed in a public market, in which they possibly used to sell meat. The certain is that the environment was matched perfectly with the perishable, organic nature of this being. What attracts our attention is the interaction between the creature and its audience. It was funny that very often the spectators behaved according to the creature's reactions. Many of them laughed at it by observing the movement of its penis. We could say

that it was equally interesting to observe the reactions of the creature and these of its audience. A dead cyborg body or a robotic Frankenstein offered entertainment to its spectators. It is almost certain that people forgot, even for few seconds, who they were 'chatting' with during the installation performance.

What kind of 'performer' did the artist create? What conditions did he 'impose' to the others? The word "impose" needs quotes, as we should take into account that the audience has, in most of the cases, the chance to choose its spectacle, to interact with it or not. Therefore, people can accept or reject their spectacle. They can stay or leave the performance space. Thus, in our case, we refer to those people who consciously entertained themselves by activating a robot, a mechanical corpse.

Marcel-li Roca created *Epizoo* soon after the *JoAn* project. It was a cyborg performance, in which the performer seemed like he took the place of the golem. Marcel-li Antunez Roca usually experiments with modern technologies of his times by creating performances, where his body w the main element.

Epizoo was an installation performance, in which the performer was connected through cables with a computer system. The orthopaedic robot-like device was attached to the performer's body with two metallic matrices, a helmet and a belt onto which the pneumatic mechanisms were fixed. The purpose of these mechanisms was to move Antunez's mouth, nose, ears, buttocks and pectorals, whilst the performer was standing on a revolving stage throughout the project. These devices were linked to a computer system, which was controlled by solenoids and relays. At the same time a special software application, such as a videogame was run on the computer. The program included eleven scenes and some animated sequences which reproduced the figure of the performer by interacting with his body, suggesting the location and movement of the devices. Thus, the operator of the system, apart from the artist's body, could manage also the lighting, pictures and sound with a mouse.

The spectator or the user of the system was able to manipulate the artist's body in a certain pre-programmed way. At this point, we are not examining the technology used during that performance, but we observe the transformation of a human into a mechanical being. Roca offered a body to his spectator for manipulation or entertainment. Spectator and performer shared the same spectacle from different points of view. At some point, we could claim that both participants identified themselves with each other. The one sitting in front of the computer transformed into a superior being or simply a puppeteer and the other one became a marionette or a moving wired doll (Figure 2b). A puppet was perceived to be alive or moved by someone. We assume that it was a unique experience for the spectator to move an alive corpse. It was a unique experience for the creator who had the chance to live his death and his mechanical resurrection at the same time. Actually, he gave the chance to people to manipulate his body the way that he desired. Who did animate the golem and "how soulless can be a puppet?" [8].

In this circumstance, the answer is not so clear. What we know is that this human 'puppet', the artist, was the director and the creator of the show. He was the 'God' of his world, the inventor of this stage. It seems that the spectator was a volunteer or a wish executer. Perhaps the spectator looks more like a puppet than a puppeteer, a marionette spectator who fulfils her/his creator's fantasies. However, no matter who the doll and the owner were, we should notice that the performance was something similar to a ruling game, in which the interaction of powers was very successful. It is obvious that without the spectator's presence 'on stage', the 'game' would not happen. Without the creator's imagination, this world, Epizoo, would not be able to come to life. A ruling game became a performance artwork. The need to rule and to be ruled was the starting and ending point of this project. As we have already mentioned earlier, every artwork is a result of our imagination. Our imagination cannot be completely independent from our social and cultural realities. When our fantasies come on stage, they mix with the actual world. In this way, they become a different reality. This new reality sometimes stays inside the walls of the theatre. Some other times bounces outside of the performing space by using the spectator as a transmitter, which spreads the news, creating at

the same time the conditions for newly evolved worlds with different mentalities and new realities.

Twelve years after the *JoAn* project, Roca has created one more body made of pigskin and cowhide. He placed it in a closed methacrylate coffin. It slowly rotted and disintegrated in front of the spectators' eyes. At the end it was revealed inside it a metal "skeleton" shaped by the words of a poem by J. Foix.

This project was a way of "bowing to the inevitable, something which he had already tried to overcome ... with the exoskeleton of another project entitled "Requiem". Nature never stops. The body is only a temporary reorganisation of matter" [9].

In many cases, death and rebirth of the performative body is the main incident, which takes place on stage. The philosophical death can become stronger in a few square meters of performance space than the realistic one. Antunez's cyborg body becomes weaker by extending it with technology. The same happens to the spectator who willingly operates an abandoned human being. The loneliness is countless and the effort to manage it is sometimes an adventure or a necessary journey through art.

Hence, if the body is nothing more than a temporary reorganisation of material, we need to relocate it from the psychological kingdom of the natural or bio-sphere. In this case the death and birth of the body obtains different significance. The body as a human entity becomes not only antiquated, but also banal and tedious; like an old useless vehicle.

Stelios Arcadiou (Stelarc) believes that we run out of all these out-dated and often questionable psycho-analytical methods, the fascination with the self and the sexual distinctions. All the symbols will start to recede in cyber structures that can observe, control, design and adjust, or alter the body.

He argues that the progression finishes when the technology starts to besiege or conquer the human body. Humans by using micro robotics joined with nanotechnology can become a host for the technology. Thus, by expanding our body with these technologies we can augment our bacteriological population, control it and reinforce it. [10]. Stelarc underlines that nowadays we are able to produce life and sustain a foetus outside the woman's womb. Technically speaking, there would be no birth and the life would no longer begin with birth. According to this way of thinking, if we can modify or substitute faulty parts of the body with other available or better components, then there should be no death, excluding the circumstances of unexpected accidents.

Obviously the artist sees his body as a "canvas". He can alter its shape, architecture and enhance the functionality of some of its parts. As we can see in Figure 3, he has added a third ear on his left hand. What becomes more significant for the artist is not the body's identity, but its connectivity. The ear on arm would transmit the sounds. It hears like an internet organ. He installed a Bluetooth transmitter while the receiver and speaker are placed inside his mouth. If someone calls him from on a cell phone he could answer through the ear and be able to hear the voice inside his head. If he opened his mouth,

we would be able to hear the other's voice "as an acoustical presence of another body from somewhere else.



Figure 3. Stelarc implanted a third ear

The body now performs beyond the boundaries of its skin and beyond the local space that it occupies." [11]. It is a wireless mixed organism which still reminds more human being than a machine. The performance of this body does not need the theatre stage. The stage is as out-dated as the human body. The 'sacrificial aesthetics' of this artwork require flesh and blood in order to happen. The performances last as long as the formerly obsolete body can only function.

However, several questions arise here. How many body parts can we replace in order to extend life? How long can a body live with modified or extended parts? How much of the body augmentations can the brain accept? What about the symbiosis and compatibility among all the simulated apparatuses and their co-operation with the brain? The brain does not work endlessly and accept certain level of stress. It is an organ that can also fail, age and damage similarly to a computer system. Should we exchange the brain with an artificial organ when it starts malfunctioning? If the answer is yes, what is going to be left of the formerly "obsolete" human? This is a technological invasion of the body and any additional development of the humans would be based on digital technologies that may also fail. By producing this kind of individuals we inevitably build new social situations. The fear to extend life and avoid the death can create the best condition for the end of the human and his obsolete body.

There are not team players or characters which convey messages to the audience in this kind of art projects, as Erving Goffman describes in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" [12]. The interaction between the performer and his audience is based on preprogramed systems like Antunez's "Epizoo" or Stelarc's "Ping Body". Both projects transform the spectator in to a user, the performer to an object.

"Ping Body" gives us an idea of what it means for a human to rule another human. In this performance, Stelarc's body converted in to a lighting installation. It was a manipulated choreography of his body with involuntary movements. The artist transformed, likewise with Antunez, the spectator into a computer operator. One could remotely activate the performer's body by connecting to Stelarc's WEB site and stimulating different parts by clicking on his graphic image. It is interesting that the artist was using ISDN links and wearing goggles on his eyes. Therefore, he could see who was actuating him. During the time that the spectator was triggering Stelarc's limbs, his body was unwillingly creating sounds and image projections in the space. The artist's body was rapped with electrodes, sensors, and transducers attached on his legs, arms and the head. All this equipment triggered body signals and sounds. His body was like a switcher for the videos, which were stimulated by a computer. He actually manages to invert the relation between the human and computer by being mechanically activated by his users, who manipulated his body like a puppet, unwillingly producing at the same time an exceptional scenography in space. At some point it was like the system took a control over its user. The cyborg body lost every human characteristic. It became an android which lost its human intelligence.

3. Manipulated bodies| Manipulated Spectators

Gordon Craig, reminds us very well how important is to rule and to be ruled on stage. He "insisted on total control over any production he was involved in" [13] including props and humans. According to his theory, the actor must leave from the stage. To be replaced by a soulless figure, which we can call Uber-marionette until it gains a better-dignified name [14]. He adored puppets, because he believed that they are superior creatures, free from emotions, senses, guilt and judgments. Craig believed that the deliverance of these feelings could turn us, the humans, into superior beings.

Did something similar happened in Epizoo project? It seemed that the performer "left" the stage and a soulless figure came in his place. The artist changed into a puppet, avatar, or golem. It does not matter how we name this creature, we should note that the hypostasis of the body-personality transferred into a different entity.

Many of us have dealt with digital characters, avatars, and more generally, with bodies, which can be "ruled" or manipulated through electronic means or manually. We are familiar with the idea of governing, operating a body, in a game or video or electronic world like Second Life. We are familiar with the dolls since we were children. We love these games because we are projected through them. We identify ourselves with certain things and travel into imaginary worlds accomplishing wishes without regret and without guilt.

In *Epizoo*, the spectator gets the satisfaction of controlling a life. He gets the right to touch somebody's body, to create pleasure or pain. He behaves like the creator of his spectacle, like a God who has the power to "control" and "rule" over his

property. This project was a very interesting identification between spectator and performer, puppeteer and marionette. Donna Haraway when referring to a cyborg, she describes it as a creature able to bridge the gap between the real and representation, the social realism and the myth [15]. She believes that this complex body incorporates two opposite phantasies: the one of the clean body and that of the contaminated. As we know, an infected body usually is punished or punishes.

What is very interesting in Epizoo, is that everything on stage, every single connection and calculation was very carefully planned in advanced. The artist designed all the images we saw on stage, took care of every electronic command that the spectator was sending to the performer's body. The movements of the golem-body in one way were involuntary in another way were extremely very well (pre) controlled or programmed. It was like a trap for the spectator who believed that he manipulated the body-doll, which was standing in front of her. We could say that the whole setting proved to be an interaction between two humans. The artist-marionette and the spectator-puppeteer. The interesting point is that the "doll" possibly manipulated the spectator much more than the other way around. It was a ruling game, in which the "victim" was leading his torturer and the last one did not refuse to participate in all this strange but familiar to all of us scenario. At the end, it is a very common idea for the societies that the strong imposes himself on the weaker one

Summary

In this article, we took into account that the Art reflects social realities, we studied the way that the human body participates in a post dramatic performance trying to understand the messages that its participation possibly transmits to us as creators or spectators. We chose to concentrate on cyborg theatre because is a kind of Performance Art, in which technology interacts with the body in a very dynamic way. This type of theatre artwork on the one side extends the body and maybe evolves it as an organism, but on the other side can abolish it in the most unhuman way. It is a type of performance, in which the human is transformed into a mixed being, which consists from flesh and electronic/metal parts. The fusion of a human with technology can excite the artist and his audience so much that sometimes it seems easy to disregard the intellectual substance of the body. Possibly the examples of the project mentioned earlier, disregard the human in terms of spiritual and psychological entity on purpose. Maybe this kind of performance is nothing more than an experiment with the new means, an excitement with the medium. No matter how we approach the merge of body and technology in Epizoo project, the fact that we lost the human by extending him is a reality. It is a reality, which creates new conditions on stage that influence the "society" inside the auditorium or this part of the society, which sits in front of the spectacle. We refer to spectators, the volunteers who came in order to contribute to their spectacle. To manipulate somebody's body by moving him around and creating stresses and pains on his parts.

In this paper, we observed the relation between the performer and the spectator, the Art and the society considering that Art is a social tool which reflects the needs of our contemporary worlds, express the evolution of our times and possibly, at some point, creates new paths for different cultures.

We noticed that the cyborg performance, in our example, creates the perfect situations for dominant interactions between spectator and performer. At this point, we would like to attract your attention to the way that the performer himself dominates his body with technologies and the way that he is using the audience in order for his body to be manipulated.

We would like to note that even though this performance was very interesting in terms of artistic and technological possibilities it perhaps created the conditions for new surveillance systems, which might have a social impact. We can see the possibilities and we admire the challenge offered by the fusion of art and technology. There are cases where the integration of the body and the technology enhances and strengthens disabled bodies such that they can perform miracles. We should investigate and experiment at the same time. There are great opportunities for creating something innovative in Art. For doing so, we should always have our bodies with us as a material and intellectual power.

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