

2020 ADELAIDE BIENNIAL OF AUSTRALIAN ART

29 FEB—8 JUN 2020

MONSTER THEATRES

Stelarc Interpretive Resource

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Stelarc

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Born in 1946 in Limassol, Cyprus, Stelarc is a pioneering Australian artist who has spent the past four decades testing the limits of the human body. His performances involve a wide spectrum of media. He has augmented the body through virtual, mechanical, surgical, synthetic and digital media, as well as using robotics.

Stelarc gained international attention as a performance artist in the late 1970s. At the time, performance art was gaining ground as a substantial sub-genre of contemporary art. Performance works are often enacted live or spontaneously, where the moment in time and place, and the dynamics between the artist and audience are of particular importance. Many of the 1970s performances were recorded or documented through photography, film or written text. Despite this, the focus for many performance artists was the impermanence of the work of art itself. Performance art proposed a radical departure from object-based art such as painting and sculpture.



performance still: Stelarc, Cyprus, born 1946, *Extended Arm*, 2011, Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne; © Stelarc/Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne, photo: Dean Winter.

Stelarc's works of art are often very physically demanding. His practice has been described using a number of unique terms: trans-human – where science and technology might help expand human experience beyond its current limits; and post-human – where a person or entity might exist in a state beyond being human, such as a cyborg or android. For Stelarc, these ideas have been expressed in many forms. He has conducted interventions into his body, such as the prosthetic *Ear on Arm* (2008-ongoing). He has augmented his body using robotics, as described in *Third Hand* (1980-98). And, he has outsourced control over his senses through digital and virtual media in *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED: Event for Dismembered Body* (2015).

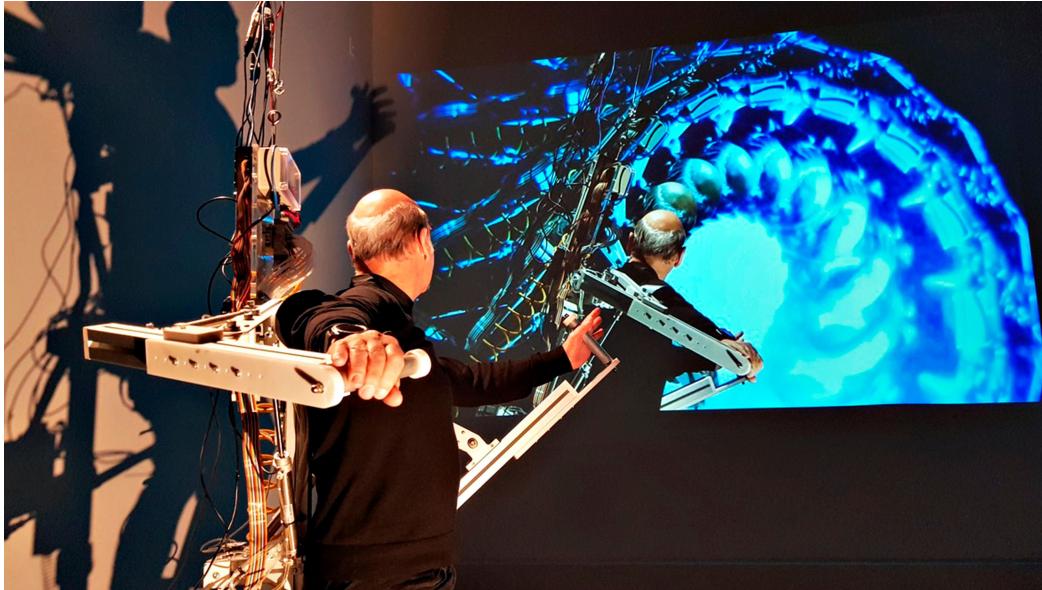


performance still: Stelarc, *Cyprus*, born 1946,
Propel: Body on Robot Arm, Demonstrable,
2015, Autronics and Lawrence Wilson Gallery,
Perth, © Stelarc/Scott Livesey Galleries,
Melbourne, photo: Steven Aylian.

Reclining StickMan (2019-20)

For *Monster Theatres*, Stelarc has produced a nine metre robot called *Reclining StickMan* (2019-20). It is the largest of his robotic works to date. The object itself is a reclining exoskeleton – an external armature that supports and protects the body. You are invited to manipulate the pneumatic muscles and steel frame of the reclining figure, playing puppeteer to the work of art.

Stelarc performed with *Reclining StickMan* during the early weeks of the biennial. Strapped to its steel frame, Stelarc invited audiences in the gallery and online to control the movements of the robot. Outsourcing his senses, range of motion and physical abilities is a recurring task within Stelarc's practice. It reflects his deep fascination with the human body as an open structure. For Stelarc, the body is a biological machine able to be altered, adjusted and potentially even redesigned.



detail: Stelarc, Australia, born 1946, *StickMan / miniStickMan*, 2019, IOTA Institute, Halifax, Nova Scotia, installation; Courtesy the artist, photo: Steven Alyan.

Reclining StickMan (2019-20)

Stelarc doesn't like to hide any technological components to his work, and so doesn't strive for a particular aesthetic or 'look'. Given the technical nature of the objects involved, his performances are populated with pneumatic tubing, valves, circuitry, steel architecture, cords and cables. In the case of *Reclining StickMan*, however, Stelarc does draw upon a long tradition within Western art history – the reclining nude. As a traditional form of figurative art, the reclining nude was frequently used by artists to study the human form. Stelarc also draws on the past in a much more fundamental way. At its simplest, the object of *Reclining StickMan* is an oversized stick figure – one of the earliest marks we make to illustrate ourselves. With a wry sense of humour Stelarc presents us with a rudimentary human form via cutting-edge technology.

Stelarc, Cyprus, born 1946, Model for *Reclining StickMan*, 2019, 3D model: Wayne Michell, Ternay, Adelaide; © Stelarc/Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne



Click on the image to watch Stelarc and *Reclining Stickman* in action

(Powerpoint must be in presentation mode for link to work)

Reclining StickMan was constructed in collaboration with the Australian Industrial Transformation Institute (AITI) at Flinders University, FESTO and consultant engineer Wayne Michell, Ternay Pty Ltd, the colossal nine-metre pneumatically powered stick figure will be on display at AGSA 29 February – 8 June.



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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2W41FySPv0&feature=emb_logo

Image: installation view: 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Monster Theatres featuring Reclining Stickman performance by Stelarc, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; photo @agsa.adelaide.

Early Years and Primary Technology | Robotics

Responding

What can you hear when looking at *Reclining StickMan*? How does this impact on what you are seeing? What other sensations do you have when viewing this work in the Gallery?

Stelarc's practice has been described as trans-human – where science and technology might help expand human experience beyond its current limits. What is something your body can't do right now that you would like it to be able to do?

Brainstorm with your class what it means to be human. Consider how technology assists the human body to function in a certain way. Perhaps you or someone you know wears glasses, or has had braces, or walks with a walking frame or has a hearing aid? Are they more or less human because of these aids? How do these types of technology differ to Stelarc? Is the purpose or intention of both the same?

Making

Eyeglasses are worn to help people see things that are far away or see things close-up more clearly, there are even some glasses that can adjust the colours people can see. Design an augmentation for your body which enhances one of your senses. What does your device look like, how is it worn? How does it extend or limit the physical capacity of your body? Create a cardboard prototype of this invention and present a pitch to your class.

Stelarc integrates his body into his works of art. What are some ways you could use your body to create a work of art? Think about how you could move your body in a different way to marks on a surface or alter the shape of the material you are using. Look at the work of American Heather Hansen who uses her entire body to create large charcoal drawings.

Create an art making machine or device. It may make multiple marks at once and may require a human to operate it. The device must not be made using any traditional art making tools.

Secondary

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Responding

Performance art usually addresses at least one of four main elements; time, space or location, the role of the artist's body or engagement between the artist the viewer. Which of these elements does Stelarc incorporate in *Reclining Stickman*?

In the 1960s and 1970s performance art proposed a radical departure from object-based art such as painting and sculpture. Trace the history of performance art. How do we define performance art? How has performance art evolved today? How has technology altered the way we engage with performance art? Conduct a class debate with the topic 'Performance art is contemporary art's most powerful medium'.

Stelarc's practice has been described as post-human – where a person might exist in a state beyond being human, such as a cyborg or android. In a way, humans can already be considered cyborgs (an organism with both biological and technological components), when we consider the use of artificial hearing implants or prosthetic limbs. Investigate bionic bodies. If everyone had access to design better, faster, stronger bodies with the help of technology, should we? Do you think we have gone too far with our use of technology to assist human health? If not, what do you think would be a step too far?

Making

Investigate a variety of performance artists. As a class categorise these artists in terms of four main elements, time, space, role of the artist's body or engagement between the artist and the viewer.

Some artists might include more than one element. Using these artists as a starting point for inspiration, create your own performance piece about a social issue that you are concerned about.

Create an art making machine or device. It may make multiple marks at once and may require a human to operate it. The device must not be made using any traditional art making tools.

Design an external armature that could protect your body. Can you still move freely in it? Are you concealed in any way? What is it made from that makes it durable?

For Stelarc, the body is a biological machine able to be altered, adjusted and potentially even redesigned. Find a story about how technology has been used to alter or redesign the human body. How has this person's life changed as a result? Make a work of art inspired by this story. You might create an installation or a performance piece.

CONTENT WARNING

These links contain reference to Stelarc's *Suspensions* which may be confronting for some viewers.

Stelarc Resources

Articles and Books

Carr, C. "Before and After Science", in *On Edge : Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut, 2008, p10-15

Engberg, J. "Stelarc", *Grove Art Online*, 16 September 2010, <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7002089485>

Smith, M. *Stelarc: the monograph*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005

Stelarc, *THE CADAVER, THE COMATOSE & THE CHIMERA: Alternate Anatomical Architectures*, self-published online, artist website, last accessed 28 January 2020, <http://stelarc.org/documents/StelarcLecture2009.pdf>

Zylinska, J. *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*, Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2002

Wynne, E. "Artist Stelarc to forfeit control of senses at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts", *ABC News*, 29 July 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-29/visitors-to-control-artists-senses-at-pica/7673366>

This resource has been written and developed by Belinda Howden, Dr. Lisa Slade, Assistant Director, Artistic Programs and Kylie Neagle, Education Officer.

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Websites

Jones, S., Murray-Cree, L. "Stelarc", *Design & Art Australia Online*, last updated 2011, <https://www.daa.org.au/bio/stelarc/biography/>

Stelarc, artist website, <http://stelarc.org/projects.php>

Tate Modern, Introduction to Performance Art, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Z-YZ3A4mdk>

Tate Modern, How to be a performance artist for kids, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsamUfMjC5M>

Videos

"Alternate Anatomical Architectures | Stelarc | TEDxVienna", *Youtube*, published by TEDx Talks, 2 December 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cx0dO0lQAI>

"Perth Artists S02E07b: Stelarc", *YouTube*, published by Perth Artists, 18 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZdygmDWZUo>

"StickMan", *YouTube*, published by Stel Stelarc, 19 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TUNIUWs9XI>

Podcasts

"Episode 7 - Bioethics with Stelarc", *Field Work*, Interview between Drew Pettifer, Stelarc and Peter Singer, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/fieldworkpodcast/episode-7-bioethics-with-stelarc>