The Prehuman Cyborg and the Posthuman Self: Stelarc’s Uncanny Performance Art

The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,
The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out.
- Walt Whitman, I Sing the Body Electric (158-159)

In *Out of Our Heads* (2009), UC Berkley professor Alva Noë claims that the Western dominant neuroscientific approach operates on the false assumption that consciousness is located inside the brain rather than distributed throughout the body, brain and world. For Noë, consciousness is not a cognitive attribute but an “achievement of the whole animal in its environmental context” akin to a “work of improvisational music” (186). If Noë is correct, consciousness, the essential element of humanity, is not a self-contained thing but an interactive process. The publication of *Out of Our Heads* has proceeded in step with a deconstructionist trajectory in the soft sciences and the proliferation of new bio/technologies in the hard sciences, all contributing to the blurring of the boundary lines that demarcate human ontology. The concept of “absolute self” or “essential humanity” seems to be under attack in the twenty first century. In the current project, I explore this issue through an analysis of the performance art of Stelarc. Unlike the majority of academics who deconstruct the body and the self with traditional modes of scholarship, Stelarc offers his body as a site of experimentation for such theories.

Stelarc (born Stelios Arcadiou but legally “Stelarc” since 1972) is an Australian-based scientist, professor and performance artist who uses bio/technology to duplicate, transfer and reconfigure his body parts and to virtually and materially connect ostensibly
separate bodies together. By means of surgical procedures, prosthetics, automation, virtual reality and the Internet, Stelarc renders his body ambiguous and transient — less a stable, organic entity and more an electronic device to be augmented, re-wired and re-coded. Depending on the day, you might catch Stelarc sporting his six-legged walking machine, his third hand or his virtual arm. When he’s not in town, you can chat with his virtual head or send a message to the Internet-enabled device that will soon be inserted into the ear on his forearm. If you’re looking for a more intimate exchange with Stelarc, you might listen to the soundtrack of his organs or watch one of various recordings of the inside of his stomach. Before delving into the philosophy behind these bizarre bodily acts, let’s take a look at where we are headed.

I begin this essay with an overview of Stelarc’s artistic and scientific oeuvre and an analysis of the ideologies that drive his work. I reconcile the curious paradox of Stelarc’s performance motive: his use of the body as an artistic medium through which to perform the obsolescence of the body. Next, I offer an exegesis of three performances: Ping Body (1995), Partial Head (2003), and Ear on Arm (in process). I discuss how Stelarc’s poststructuralist figuration of the self resonates with Noë’s theory about distributed consciousness, Haraway’s approach to objectivity, various theories of the uncanny and my own feminist scholastic interests. This leads me to Shildrick’s work on “existential vulnerability,” which I use to establish the metaphysical authenticity and ethical nature of the cyborg. I argue that Stelarc’s body-in-becoming extends human agency into the world and invites the agentive world into the human body. While Stelarc presents this as an act of invention, I contend that it is a form of revelation: the body has always been open to and enmeshed in the animate and agentive universe. The human is
fundamentally uncanny: always both inside and outside, self and other, familiar and strange.

And now we return to the curious world of Stelarc. Perhaps we should start this journey by asking: why does Stelarc do such peculiar things to his body? The answer Stelarc provides is that his work exposes the reality that “the body is obsolete.” Wait, what? Yes, you read that right. Stelarc identifies himself as “post-human” and believes he does not have a “body” (*Information Arts*, 159). At first blush, this seems absurd. How can Stelarc use his “body” as the medium in performance while simultaneously denying that he *has* a body? Approaching this seeming paradox requires acceptance of two important distinctions: that anti-humanism is not necessarily anti-existence, and that to be anti-body is not necessarily to be anti-embodiment. Stelarc identifies with the term “cyborg,” describing his corporeal material as “meat, metal and code.” During a 2002 interview with Joanna Zylinska, Stelarc acknowledges that “an intelligent agent has to be embodied and embedded in the world; you can’t have an intelligent entity without some kind of physical interface to a complex environment” (para. 16).

The terms “human” and “body” are problematic for Stelarc because they connote stability, fixity and permanence, a set of properties that conflict directly with Stelarc’s view of humanity as having “no absolute nature” in the sense that “what it means to be human is being constantly redefined” (*Information Arts*, 158). This philosophical approach seems to imply that Stelarc not only believes that *he* is not a human and that *he* does not have a body, but that in contemporary society, humans and bodies don’t exist *at all*. While some people might contend Stelarc is in denial about his humanity, Stelarc would propose they are in denial about their cyborgian constitution.
Stelarc most strongly disapproves of the notion that humanity is distinct from technology: that technology is instrumental to — rather than substantial to — human corporeality. This conviction resonates strongly with me. I believe that technology shapes humanity: human consciousness, human biology, and in effect, human possibilities and the meanings we make in the world. While there is certainly a speculative and anticipatory quality to posthuman cyborg politics, there is also a material here-and-now element to it. Most people, I imagine, do not consider themselves cyborgs even if they (for instance): use prosthetics (including glasses or braces); dye their hair; eat genetically modified foods; breathe chemicals and pesticides; ingest pharmaceuticals; are exposed to radiation; undergo in-vitro fertilization; receive blood transfusions, vaccines, or organ transplants; use electronic devices to communicate with others or facilitate mental development. Et Cetera. From even this short list, it is clear that the use of technologies that alter the human body, human consciousness, and human experience is pervasive in our society. So why do we shrink from embracing the reality of technology’s impact on our biological and cognitive constitution? I suspect that the hesitancy is primarily one of labeling: the term “human” is cozy and familiar, whereas the term “cyborg” has a strange and foreboding ring to it. It is my hope, through the current project, to help render the “human” strange and the “cyborg” familiar — because I believe, along with Stelarc, that technology is not simply something we use but something we are. If this is true, then to understand the dynamics of the human-technology-world relationship, we must first redefine and re-conceptualize each of these terms and then examine the ways in which they interact with each other.
Up to this point, my interpretations of Stelarc’s statements have resonated with his purported performative and ideological intentions, however, throughout this project, I admit to sometimes interpreting Stelarc’s work against the grain of those intentions. While I support Stelarc’s posthuman and anti-body stance, I am sometimes frustrated by his sensational rhetoric, which seems to be designed to draw attention to himself and to distance himself from other people rather than to clearly express his opinions. For instance he describes himself as cadaverous, chimerical, alien, zombie-like and parasitic (“Zombies and Cyborgs”).

Even though Stelarc recognizes that he is embodied in a physical world, his slippery use of language sometimes contradicts this acknowledgement. For instance, he claims, “What it means to be human is no longer being immersed in genetic memory but in being reconfigured in the electromagnetic field of the circuit in the realm of the image” (Virtual Theaters, 61, emphasis in original). In addition, his language seems to imply a claim that he has crafted a new human, or that technology has fundamentally changed
human nature. He says: “the desire to locate the self simply within a particular biological body is no longer meaningful” (Digital Delirium, 197, emphasis added); I’ve moved beyond the skin as a barrier (198, emphasis added); The body has become profoundly obsolete in the intense information age (Information Arts, 158, emphasis added). These statements are problematic because they insinuate that the “body” once existed. I do not take this position; I do not think that Stelarc has fundamentally changed the ontology of the human, but simply that the experimental way he uses technology on his body opens up an imaginative and existential space in which we can reflect on what it means to be human and what it means to be-in-the-world.

In *Out of Our Heads* Noë insists: “Just as we will not draw an impermeable boundary around the brain, we will not draw such a boundary around the individual organism itself” (185). Stelarc’s body may be seen as a corporeal articulation of this statement. Stelarc claims: “Skin was once the boundary of the self...[but it] no longer signifies closure” (Virtual futures, 118). While the technological methods Stelarc uses to unseal his skin are innovative, the notion that skin does not “signify closure” is not new. In *Organ And Tissue Donation: An Evidence Base For Practice* (2007), Payne and Sque suggest “the eighteenth and nineteenth century marked the emergence of the modern self, experienced on the inside and separate from the outside.” This conception of the self differed from “popular medieval conceptions,” which linked the body “inextricably to nature.” During the twentieth century, while this transition was taking place, “skin became the central metaphor for separateness.” Banthein identifies “the change of skin within the history of mentalities as a move from a porous, tissue like membrane to an impenetrable wall of separation” (qtdd. in Payne and Sque, 162). We should keep in mind
then that when Stelarc attempts to render his skin porous, this is both an attempt to move beyond and precede the modernist notion of the bounded body.

During a 2011 speech at the University of Warwick, Stelarc described three kinds of open flesh: “fractal flesh,” “phantom flesh,” and “circulating flesh.” The three performances I will describe below — Ping Body (1995), Partial Head (2003), and Ear on Arm (in process) — correspond, respectively, to these three open flesh categories. These performances do not involve the use of highly original or advanced forms of bio/technology, nor have they been notably successful. Ping Body was performed twenty years ago; Ear on Arm is an on-going performance that has been fraught with difficulties and setbacks; Partial Head was a complete failure. My decision to look closely at these specific performances may seem strange given their lack of “success”; however, my intention in this project is not to document the most advanced and impressive developments in bio/technology, but rather to shift the paradigmatic way in which we think and talk about technology and the body. I have selected these particular
performances not because they incorporate new technologies, but because they each utilize existing technologies in new ways that initialize new possibilities for thinking about what it means to be human and have a body. The tone I adopt below is subjunctive, not indicative, and I do not use a positivist approach to evaluate Stelarc’s work. I am not interested in Stelarc’s body or in what he is able to do with that body, per se; I am less concerned with the signified than with the signifier and the expression of the signifier. I seek to capture the aura of his work: the mystery he evokes, the unexpected connections he makes, and the modernist blind spots he brings to light.

Fractal Flesh: “Ping Body: An Internet Actuated and Uploaded Performance”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTYYZG0f68

Stelarc defines “fractal flesh” as “disconnecting and electronically fusing bodies and body parts together” (“Stelarc at The University of Warwick”). Stelarc renders his
flesh fractal in “Ping Body: An Internet Actuated and Uploaded Performance” (1996) by attaching a robotic third arm to his body and placing electrodes on his stomach, his left leg and his left arm. The electrodes on Stelarc’s stomach are connected to the robotic third arm, allowing Stelarc to control the movements of the third arm by flexing his abdominal muscles. The electrodes placed on his left leg and left arm are connected to the Internet via electrodes, allowing Internet users to control the movement of Stelarc’s left arm and left leg by “pinging” him. The pinging produced both body spasms and sounds, resulting in an in/voluntary dance.

In this performance, Stelarc blurs the human/technology dichotomy on two fronts: he exercises control over his robotic third arm by interfacing it with his biological body while simultaneously relinquishing control over various parts of his biological body by interfacing them with the Internet and its users. Stelarc describes the performance as an “inversion of the usual interface of the body to the net. Instead of collective bodies determining the operation of the Internet, the collective internet activity moves the body” (Body Modification, 146). This mixture of organic and robotic agency results in both a robotic body and an embodied robot. Stelarc describes this performance as an articulation of four interconnected modes of movement: “voluntary, involuntary, controlled and programmed” (qtd. in Massumi, 118). These forms of movement, in turn, represent modes of agency, which transmute into one another in performance. Here, voluntary action (invention of the third arm and attachment of the internet-enabled electrodes to Stelarc’s body) opens an avenue to involuntary action (relinquishment of partial bodily control to the will of Internet users). Simultaneously, programmed action (commands
imbedded in the robotic third arm) is turned over to controlled action (arm movements articulated through the flexing of stomach muscles).

Massumi states of this performance that various “modes of agency cooperate in the network” and that the “internet events catch agency in movement” (Massumi, 129). Human agency exists “in a kind of micro-suspension, contributing to a rhythmic transduction of electromagnetic into organic forces” and vice versa (Massumi, 118).

Where the human body is traditionally understood as a locus of individual self-agency, Stelarc’s body is a host for shared agency. When Stelarc extends his agency into the world, he demonstrates that human embodiment and human agency are not givens, but are flexible constructs that can be shaped.

In *Out of Our Heads*, Noë argues that the Western cognitive scientific perspective downplays “the role of the ‘external world’ in consciousness” and he proposes we heed Susan Hurley’s argument that “the skull is not a magical membrane” to “take seriously the possibility that casual processes that matter for consciousness are themselves boundary crossing and therefore, world involving” (49). For Noë, understanding consciousness means acknowledging that the “machinery of the mind” is not “confined to the skull” (82) but has an “extended” character (65). In other words, the human/world boundary is fundamentally open. This means that Stelarc’s “fractal flesh” or act of “opening” his body to the agency of technology does not so much extend his agency as draw attention to its already distributed character. Stelarc breaks with traditional teleological continuity here by using technology in a way that reverses the modernist notion of progress. He uses technology not to magnify or master individual agency, but to thrust it out into the world toward objects and other people. In return,
technology extends its agency back to Stelarc by granting Stelarc an alternate perspective on humanity.

In *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1989), Donna Haraway argues that the traditional model of objectivity does not grant the “knower” accurate knowledge of the world because it presupposes that the world outside of the self is “raw material for humanization” rather than a “coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse” (596). She writes: “boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky” (595). Haraway contends that authentic knowledge requires “the ‘activation’ of previously passive categories of knowledge” (594) and this involves “granting the status of actor/agent to the ‘objects’ of the world” (593). In “Ping Body,” Stelarc engages with *technology as agent*. The result is that technology’s role slips from the instrumental to the ontological, from the reflective to the transformative. In the modern tradition, technology is intended to demonstrate humanity’s transcendence from the natural world; its agency becomes evident in “Ping Body” because it establishes humanity’s *kinship* with the natural world.
Circulating Flesh: “Ear on Arm”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cx0d0OlQAI (9:15-12:40)

Circulating flesh refers to the movement of corporeal material either intracorporeally (from one body part to another) or intercorporeally (between bodies). Stelarc began contemplating his circulating flesh performance, *Ear on Arm*, in 1996, in the wake of *Ping Body*. Stelarc fantasized about having an internet-enabled extra ear capable of both receiving and transmitting sound on the side of his head. It took Stelarc ten years to find a surgeon willing to perform the operation, and even then only under the condition that the ear be inserted onto Stelarc’s forearm, not his head. In 2006, excess skin was produced from his arm, harvested in a lab, and then inserted as a “biocompatible scaffold,” complete with a miniature wireless microphone and transmitter, into his left forearm. The microphone and transmitter later had to be removed due to infection, but Stelarc plans to have them reinserted again in the near future. After the re-insertion, Stelarc plans to continue the project by integrating “an extended and distributed
Bluetooth system” with both speaker and receiver located inside his mouth (Ear on Arm, para. 2). His description of this project is compelling:

If you were to telephone me on your mobile phone, I could speak to you through my ear, but I would hear your voice 'inside' my head. If I keep my mouth closed only I will be able to hear your voice. If someone is close to me and I open my mouth, that person will hear the voice of the other coming from this body, as an acoustical presence of another body from somewhere else (ibid).

As in *Ping Body*, Stelarc’s intention with *Ear on Arm* is to enhance his body’s function as “an extended operational system” by “connect[ing it] to a global, distributed awareness.” In the idealized version of this performance, the Other’s voice would come from within him, obscuring the physical boundary between Self and Other and problematizing the notion of Self as bounded and singular. By modulating the body, Stelarc deconstructs and reassembles “evolutionary architecture” (Ear on Arm, para. 3).

There is an interesting opportunity for intimacy here between the feminist poststructuralist movement and the cyborg/posthuman movement. According to poststructuralists, our understanding of what it means to be human is rooted in the division of life into binary oppositions. These binaries constitute the bedrock of “reality” from which we produce universal categories and concepts that erase difference and specificity. Feminist poststructuralists are particularly interested in deconstructing the nature vs. culture binary. From a patriarchal or hegemonic perspective, technology is imaged to exist wholly within the realm of culture and biology wholly within the realm of nature. Technologizing the body destabilizes the nature vs. culture binary that undergirds patriarchal thought. New developments in “circulating flesh” break down this binary. For instance, scientists are now able to use skin cells from men and women to engineer artificial sperm (Friger, para. 1). Biotechnological procedures such as hormone therapy
and sex reassignment surgery are changing the way we conceptualize sex and gender. With the advent of factory-made testosterone and estrogen, it is not unrealistic to imagine a future where choosing one’s “sex” or “gender” is as simple as choosing whether or not to receive certain hormone injections.

Bio/technological developments such as those described above not only shake the foundation of patriarchy by loosening the putative link between women and nature, but also problematize larger ideas that foreground all categories of embodiment. While it is common to find technology used on the body in order to change the body’s shape, function and biological makeup, Stelarc’s use of bio/technology is particularly innovative in its disruption of the ontological order and the western logos: by employing bio/technology to add to, de-individualize, and decenter the normative body, Stelarc’s work inherently rejects the purity and desirability of normative embodiment.

For his phantom flesh “Partial Head” project, Stelarc’s face was scanned and subsequently superimposed over a scanned hominoid skull, resulting in a “composite image that was posthumanoid but prehuman in appearance.” This image was then printed, covered with “thermal plastic” and “seeded” with a layer of live simian skin. The Partial Head was a “partial portrait of the artist” and was “partially living” (Partial Head, para. 3). It was kept in an “incubator and circulatory system which immersed the head in nutrient kept at 37° Celsius.” After one week, the head became contaminated and the project was abandoned (Partial Head, para. 4). I include this experiment to illustrate that Stelarc is not only interested in probing the human/machine distinction but the human/animal distinction as well. I interpret this interest as part of one of Stelarc’s overarching goals: to represent evolution as spontaneously developed rather than eternally designed. In “Partial Head,” the traditional use of technology is inverted: modern technology is used not to advance humanity beyond its “primitive” nature, but to genetically (re)connect humans to “lower” primate species.

According to Haraway, simians, as creatures more human than other animals but less human than humans, “occupy the borderlands between nature and culture” (Primate Visions, 15). Stelarc, too, positions himself in such a borderland: between nature and culture, purity and pollution, self and other. During an interview with Joanna Zylinska, Stelarc emphasizes that he is interested in “what happens between states, between people: not so much at the boundary but between boundaries.” He says: “I want to explore the slippage, the ambiguities, the ambivalences” (para. 7).
In “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Derrida argues that Western philosophical interpretation “in all [its] metaphysical, ethical and juridical consequences depend[s] on what is presupposed by the general singular of this word _Animal_” (409, emphasis in original). For Derrida, the human/animal binary is archetypal in the modernist tradition, where it functions as an ontological structuring system and discursive device that juxtaposes human — exceptional in its purity — to animal. According to Spivak, the “great doctrines of identity of the ethical universal, in terms of which liberalism thought out its ethical programmes, played history false, because the identity was disengaged in terms of who was and who was not human.” Racism could be justified and accepted because, “after all, these people had not graduated into humanhood” (qtd. in Thornhill, 183). Within the category “human,” then, can be found a further distinction between the more human and the less human, which is putatively closer to animal. While such distinctions within the realm of humanity are clearly false, I argue that the human vs. animal binary itself is too simplistic a construct to represent the complexity of the human/animal relationship in the technological or the natural realm.

While Stelarc’s experiment with “Partial Head” was not successful, this is not the only instance of xenotransplantation (the infusion of nonhuman biological material into human bodies) that complicates the purity of the human/animal distinction. In “Coming Age of Xenotransplantation: Would You Accept an Organ from a Pig to save Your Life?” (2005), David Warmflash of the Genetic Literacy Project states that while organ transplants between humans and animals are currently rare, “over the past few decades, xenotransplantation of tissues and pieces of organs has become routine.” Many humans, for instance, “have received replacement valves from the hearts of pigs and cows.”
If the idea of interspecies biological material seems strange, consider the contention of evolutionary biologist and author of *Acquiring Genomes* (2002) Lynn Margulis that “we people are really walking assemblages, beings who have integrated various other kinds of organisms” (19). While we tend to think of evolution in Darwinian terms as the ascent of a single species, Margulis’s *Symbiogenesis* theory proposes that “biological newness and growing complexity” derive from “mutually parasitic co-habitation of bacterial cells” or “absorbing genes that did not originally belong to a system” that then become “a permanent component in the genome of the life form” (Rossini, para. 22).

In *Out of our Heads*, Noë makes a similar argument regarding the influence of non-human animals on humans. He proposes that human consciousness cannot be wholly differentiated from the consciousness of other species. He challenges the traditional ontology of consciousness by explaining that even bacteria have primary consciousness. He says: the bacterium is not merely a process, it is an agent (40). Bacteria are animate and agentive in the sense that they respond to their environment and comprise part of the world that contributes to the reality of human consciousness. Both the primary consciousness of the bacterium and the secondary consciousness of the human are “in the world and of it” (95).

If interspecies evolution is standard practice and human consciousness cannot be absolutely differentiated from nonhuman consciousness, the rigidity of the human vs. animal binary is problematic. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour argues that, “to privilege the historical time of the humanities is to remain entangled in the double-bind of philosophical and techno-scientific modernity, endlessly engaged in rituals of
purification” (101). Stelarc’s experiment is successful insofar as it invites us to think about human identity in relation to trans-species contamination/co-evolution/coupling. It is productive because it may lead us to ask: What is an intelligible life? What modes of embodiment are habitable? How might we move forward or “evolve” into new zones of Otherness outside of the “endlessly engaged ritual of purification”?

It might seem strange, at this point, to turn to Freud for help in our understanding of the posthuman. After all, Freud was a determinist who likely believed that the objective laws of psychoanalysis could explain all of human experience. However, by popularizing the theory that human motivation is rooted in an instinctual-unconscious (rather than rational-transcendent) mind, and by suggesting that this mind often holds contradictory drives simultaneously, he also helped pave the road to posthumanism. In particular, we may point to Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny” (Das Unheimliche) as a key prefigural element of this movement.

In “The Uncanny,” Freud builds upon a theory first articulated and explored in Wilhelm Jentsch’s “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” (1906). According to Jenstch,
the uncanny is a manifestation of our “intellectual uncertainty”; it is the feeling that occurs when we brush up against something we cannot explain. Freud complicates this interpretation through a philological analysis of the term “uncanny” (loosely translated as “heimlich” in German), demonstrating that the term “heimlich: homely or familiar” houses its opposite meaning, “unheimlich: hidden or strange” (2). Unheimlich therefore denotes the paradoxical kinship between the twin feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity. Freud rationalizes this paradox by proposing that the uncanny signifies the return of repressed “infantile” or “primitive” memories. He claims that as a reminder of our psychic past, the uncanny “leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (2). For Freud, it is the unconscious, which is both within us and inaccessible to us, that produces the uncanny effect. According to Freud, there are four phenomena that trigger the uncanny feeling. I will describe each of these categories of uncanniness in turn and discuss their application to Stelarc’s performance art.

The first category of the uncanny involves anything that reminds us of the castration-complex (7). The cyborg may be associated with the castration-complex insofar as it challenges the phallocentric/patriarchal logic of essentialism and binarism. The second source of the uncanny is anything that manifests itself as a double, leading to a “doubling, dividing and interchanging of the Self” (9). Through his work, Stelarc “doubles” himself on his spectators by drawing attention to the cyborgian nature of all humanity. In Ping Body, he divides and interchanges his agency and awareness by interfacing himself with machines, the Internet, and Internet users. In Ear on Arm, Stelarc’s extra ear is uncanny because unlike standard prosthetics, Stelarc’s extra ear is not a replacement for something that is lacking; it is excess. It is a double. While a
prosthetic replacement lacks uncanniness because it acts to confirm our assumptions about what a body ought to look like by “repairing” the original shape of the body, Stelarc’s extra ear, by contrast, challenges this shape.

Freud’s third explanation for the uncanny is associated with our compulsion for repetition. Stelarc’s use of technology is radically Other — it is non-medical, non-aesthetic and non-utilitarian (in the instrumental capitalist sense). This Otherness breaks with normative modes of embodiment and identity, and thus draws attention to the ritualistic and compulsive character of western modern modes of life. Finally, Freud’s fourth category of the uncanny brings us back to the “old, animistic conception of the universe,” characterized by the superstition of the “omnipotence of thoughts” or the “idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings” (12-13). By ostensibly opening the body/world binary, Stelarc animates the world and the world animates Stelarc. Humanity creates technology as technology creates humanity. The positive feedback loop between human and machine reveals the symbiosis between self and world. Freud’s temporal framework here is inverted. The conception of the animate universe is not an immature or primitive notion, but a technologically advanced one. The outside world is, in a sense, contemplative, agentive, and animated.

Freud’s theory of the uncanny is premised on the intrinsic nature of certain binaries, including animate/inanimate, civilized/primitive, immature/mature, subject/object. According to Freud, children and “primitive” humans engage in a form of “primary narcissism,” in that they “do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects” (9). In other words, the child or the “primitive” human animates the universe in order to mirror itself on the world. If we recall Haraway’s position that
genuine knowledge of the world requires “the ‘activation’ of previously passive
categories of knowledge,” we may conclude that adults, or “civilized” humans,
distinguish between animate and inanimate objects too sharply, and it is the purity of the
imagined distinction itself that is “narcissistic.” I am attracted to Stelarc’s performances
because his “extrusion of awareness” may be interpreted as a move to dethrone the
human as the locus of agency and meaning-making power in the world.

Freud’s theory of the uncanny emphasizes a state of conflict at play between two
dichotomous mindsets. For Freud, the uncanny does not reveal anything true about
humanity or humanity’s position in the universe. I prefer Jenstch’s theory of
“intellectually uncertainty” as a key source of the uncanny, which reflects something true
that escapes our intellectual and imaginative capacities and cannot be captured by any
epistemological framework. While I propose that the uncanny reflects openness between
self and world, I certainly do not feign to be able to grasp the meanings generated by this
dynamic in any absolute or concrete way. If the human is always susceptible to the
agency of the world, the human is always profoundly mysterious.

In her thesis “Heidegger on Being Uncanny,” Katherine Withy describes
Heidegger’s existential theory of the uncanny as the self’s “constitutive inability to grasp
its own thrown ground” (18). According to Withy, Heidegger conceives of the uncanny
not as a feeling or experience but as a “feature of human essence” (7). This suggests that
humanity is “fundamentally strange to itself” because “we can be what we are only if we
do not fully understand what it is to be us” (1). Heidegger’s concept of the uncanny
reveals the “finitude” and “fragility” of meaning and meaning-making (6).
As I have argued, the cyborg represents humanity’s continual vulnerability to the agentive universe. The human is not in full control over its body, its self or the meanings it makes in the world. This is not intended as a relativistic or nihilistic claim about meaning or human ability to make meaning in the world; rather it is to suggest that a world of becoming is also a world of continual loss and regeneration. In *Parables of the Virtual*, Brian Massumi writes in relation to Stelarc that the cyborg exposes “the limit expression of what the human shares with everything it is not: a bringing out of its inclusion in matter, its belonging in the self-referential material world in which every being unfolds” (128). Stelarc’s use of technology embraces the symbiotic relation of self and world, which both limits the agentive power of the human while rendering the human “existentially unbounded.” (ibid).

We may say that the human is uncanny — not at home in its body — because the body itself is not a “home” in the traditional sense; it is not inside, not bounded, not pure-self. However, it is at home in the world. In the words of Noë: “We are in the world and of it. We are home sweet home” (186). Perhaps the body is like a home, but the front door is always open and otherness is always creeping in. This echoes an argument made by Margarit Shildrick in *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002).

Shildrick argues that “disability,” perceived as “monstrosity,” has been a source of great anxiety throughout western history because it brings awareness to the universal ontological condition of “existential vulnerability” (52). In other words, even though all identities and bodies are open and vulnerable, “disabled” or “monstrous” bodies are perceived as lacking humanity because that vulnerability is salient. “Monsters” generate
anxiety not because they are less human than normative or able-bodied individuals, but because their (uncanny) humanity is undeniable. Perhaps the cyborg is a new kind of monster, which draws attention to the vulnerability of the self to the agency of world. If existential angst and uncanny embodiment are central aspects of humanity, Western hegemonic constructions of the “human” are not at all human — while Stelarc’s posthuman Self is, in the words of Nietzsche, “human all too human.”

To summarize, I have argued that, because the natural world is agentive and the self/world binary is open (and has always been open), the human is fundamentally uncanny. New and evolving developments in bio/technology are opening up new ways of expressing and exploring this interconnectivity of self to world in order to move beyond modernist classificatory systems that circumscribe the parameters of the self.

By inventing and reinventing himself on the cusp of the postmodern, Stelarc lives on the frontier of bio/technological experience. By operating within liminal spaces and engaging with the world-as-agent, he charts new electric pathways of embodiment. An analysis of his body-in-becoming exposes the fluidity and changeability of all bodies, and makes manifest the open, vulnerable, interactive nature of the Self. To make sense of emerging technologies and their influence on human life, I turn to Stelarc and his uncanny ability to summon us into the liminal realm of becoming — if only to remind us that we’ve been there all along.
**Works Cited**


