

HELLO VAN GOGH, can you hear me now?

A fake ear implanted in the arm of the artist known as Stelarc will be wired for sound in a move that some see as a further erosion of the traditional notions of life, death and identity

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Luckily for us, the Australian performance artist known as Stelarc, formerly Stelios Arcadiou, is not prone to sensationalism. He only wants to transform his body into a portal on the Internet. Which is why visitors to Exit Art, a gallery in Midtown Manhattan, are being treated to a video of Stelarc's left arm being cut up like a rare tenderloin to implant what will eventually be a Bluetooth-enabled artificial ear.

Stelarc's video is one the more grisly highlights of Corpus Extremus (LIFE+), an exhibit about the wonders and horrors of PostNatural History, and the ways in which technology is blurring the traditional notions of life, death and identity.

In the gallery of post-natural history, for example, is a goat that has been genetically tinkered with to produce spider silk, useful for fishing line and bulletproof vests, in its milk. Elsewhere you can look through a microscope and see a movie projected on living cells, watch a movie of Russian cosmonauts examining grains of kefir, a yogurtlike drink popular in Russia, to determine the grains' potential worthiness as "cosmonauts," or see a mock documentary about an S&M organic farm collective.

In the early days of the show you could walk through a forest of poles wired with antennas transmitting signals of your presence to a vat of neurons at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Signals back from the neurons would activate pen recorders to run up and down the poles and inscribe them with stripes.

Silent Barrage, as it is called, is dormant now, the connection to the neurons having been turned off. But if this gadget was alive while it was awake, could running around in it too much make it crazy and constitute abuse?

ART OR SCIENCE?

Nine years ago, when Exit Art presented an earlier show about genetics, the burning debate was about whether genes and life forms could be patented. Ownership of our genes might be at stake, but not our humanity or our identities as trees or people, dead or alive and machine or animate. I remember wandering around that show, Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution, marveling at the dedication and the scientific acumen of the artists, who had done things like raise photosensitive grass and clone tree.

Now it's all up for grabs, and paradise has gotten a lot darker.

"A foundational idea for this show was that we are

permanently in a condition of creating, being excited or horrified by our inventions," said Boryana Rossa, a Bulgarian-born artist and graduate student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York.

She said it was all right if people were confused and left the gallery wondering whether what they had seen was art or science. The important thing was to start a conversation about what technology could do to us. The artists, she said, have hands-on experience with biology in programs like SymbioticA, a lab at the University of Western Australia where artists and biologists collaborate.

Artists are the antennas of society, but they are not the only ones thinking about these issues.

Some thinkers, including Freeman Dyson, the physicist and futurist at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, have suggested that the Darwinian interlude of 3 billion years of evolution by means of mutations passing down through species is coming to an end. In its place would be a technologically enabled swapping of genes across species. Carl Woese, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has theorized that such horizontal gene transfer prevailed in the primordial soup before cells got locked in species. We will be fine with it, Dyson has said, when children start breeding miniature dinosaurs with rabbit ears and other exotic creatures for science fairs the way horticulturists turn out new breeds of tomatoes.

The body, however, has its ways of fighting back against the five-year, or 500-year plans of its owners. Geneticists report that our own genes are still evolving — to what end, no one can guess. No supercomputer can yet predict from simply reading a sequence of As, Cs, Ts and Gs that make up a genetic code what creature will emerge.

'POST-EVOLUTIONARY STRATEGIES'

The progression to post-natural history may be a painful birth if the experience of Stelarc, 62, who splits his time between Brunel University in West London and the University of Western Sydney in Australia, is any example. The body, he says, is obsolete and needs to map its "post-evolutionary strategies."

To that end, Stelarc has outfitted himself at times with an extra hand (nonsurgically), swallowed a camera that would explore the sculpture of his stomach and hung himself in the air on hooks. For a show called Fractal Flesh, he wired half his body, in Luxembourg, up to muscle stimulation equipment that could be controlled by computers in Paris; Helsinki, Finland; and Amsterdam, Netherlands. The result, he told an interviewer later, "was a split body experience."

The ear on his arm, he said, is a work in progress that has required a couple of surgeries so far. It took him 12 years to find the doctors and the financing, which was provided by the Discovery Channel as part of a series in experimental surgery, to do the work.

The doctors, Stelarc said,

were a little dubious that this was art. "They were overheard discussing, though, that perhaps they were really the artists and my body was just the canvas!" he said in an e-mail message.

The ear was originally slated for the outside of his left arm, but during the process of stretching the skin to provide space for the ear, a necrosis developed and the ear's location had to move. In 2006, as shown in the gallery video, surgeons in Los Angeles installed a porous polyethylene ear-shaped prosthesis in his forearm and then snugged his skin down over it. At the same time, he says, they installed a tiny microphone, which picked up the doctor's voices even through bandages and a face mask.

INTERNET-ENABLED ORGANS

Unfortunately the microphone became seriously infected and had to be removed. "I could have lost an arm for an ear," Stelarc said.

Stelarc's own tissues and blood vessels have since grown into the prosthesis, anchoring it permanently. More surgeries are planned to improve its sculptural relief, including adding a bag of his own stem cells for an earlobe.

"The ear visualizes that idea that we can now engineer additional organs, Internet-enabled, to better function in the technological terrain that we now inhabit," he said. "It is also an image of excess, of ambivalence and of the alternate."

Once the microphone is reinstalled, Stelarc said, anything it "hears" will be wirelessly transmitted to the Web. Someone in Paris could log in and hear what Stelarc is up to in Australia — or presumably hear him snoring.

Stelarc says he understands that some people may be uneasy and squeamish about what he is doing. For his own part, he said, "You're never in your comfort zone." Such is the price of being a performance artist.

"Most of the projects and performances I've done have either been physically difficult or technically complicated to achieve," he said. "Sometimes both, ha ha."

Australian performance artist Stelarc intends to install a tiny microphone in the fake ear on his arm that will wirelessly transmit anything it "hears" to the Web.

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