

# HONORARY AWARD IONIAN UNIVERSITY

## ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

**Stelarc**

Much of Greek philosophy belongs to the aural tradition. That is, it is spoken, argued and gestured and thus can be characterized as being essentially performative and embodied, grounded in the Greek ideal of the classically poised and restrained body. As a performance artist, my interest has been more formal rather than personal, rather than being psycho-social in intent. The performances are more about choreography rather than the cathartic. I have always considered the body not as an object of desire, but rather as an object to design- or even to redesign. What is seductive about Object Oriented Ontology though, is that it does not premise the human. It is a kind of flattened ontology, in this extended technological terrain in which we inhabit. Where a body, an amoeba, an artifact or an algorithm are considered equally important. Every thing attains equal importance. The body is one thing in a universe of my other interacting objects, structures, events and algorithms.

The poet and novelist, Charles Bukowski proclaimed that an intellectual says a simple thing in a hard way but that an artist says a hard thing in a simple way. Or phrased somewhat differently, art is more about affect than information. But a performance artist also has to take the physical consequences for his or her ideas. Performance Art is not about the theoretical, the abstract or the metaphorical. To make three films of the inside of your body, to insert a sculpture inside your stomach, to suspend your body by its skin, to surgically construct and cell grow an ear on your arm are all seductive ideas but physically difficult to realize. Whilst the Third Hand, the six-legged walking robot and the Prosthetic Head were technically challenging projects. The performances are done with a posture of indifference, that is as opposed to expectation, remaining open to possibility. The performances are structured but not scripted. There is an interest in

alternate anatomical architectures, interfacing bodies and machines and tentatively exploring the transhuman and posthuman condition.

I would like to acknowledge the Rector and Sub-Rectors of the Ionian University, the Provost of the Faculty of Music & Audiovisual Arts and the Head of the Department of Audio and Visual Arts for granting me this honor. I would also like to thank Anna Hatziyiannaki, from Athens who has always supported my work and has curated the exhibition here in Corfu and Dalila Honorato who has organized my participation in the festival.

It is particularly relevant for me as a Greek Cypriot to receive this Honorary Doctorate from the Ionian University of Corfu in Greece, and as a performance artist, receiving this doctorate from the Department of Audio and Visual Arts, School of Music and Audiovisual Arts. Thank you.

My parents emigrated to Australia when I was four years old and I grew up in Melbourne, now effectively the third largest Greek city in the world. Several years after art school, having studied Western Art and Western philosophy and being immersed in my Greek heritage, there was an urge to experience an oriental culture. I decided to move to Japan in 1970, where I had intended to stay for a few years, but lived there for 19 years. I had always been intrigued by traditional oriental culture but was also seduced by the state-of-the-art media technology and robotics being developed in Japan. I would say, in retrospect, that what influenced my artistic practice most was not Japanese traditional culture but rather Japanese medical and prosthetics technology. What necessitated my moving back to Australia was the deterioration of my father's health.

I would like to dedicate this doctorate to my mother who still lives in Melbourne, to my two daughters Astra and Nova and to my partner, Nina Sellars who is also an artist. One artist is usually enough in one family, but in this case we complement and counterpoint each other's practice.

My parents always encouraged me to do art as a child but hoped I would choose a more acceptable career such as architecture or medicine when I grew up. Although I was accepted in the School of Architecture at the University of Melbourne, I decided nonetheless to do a visual arts course instead. Having done that though, I have always retained an interest in Architecture and Medicine and they have informed my practice, as have prosthetics, robotics and cognitive sciences.

This award should not only be about my career as a performance artist but should also acknowledge my collaborators over all these years. For me, ideas by themselves are not meaningful enough. Ideas are easy. To actualize them is what is difficult. The programmers, engineers, medical practitioners and fellow artists who have assisted and made possible my projects and performances should also be acknowledged.

My high school art teacher, Lloyd Jones, was a major influence in my life as he re-directed my brashness and generated a deeper understanding of artistic sensibility. And later at Art School, even though I was not carving, molding, casting or welding, Ken Scarlett still accepted the helmets and immersive installations I had constructed as sculptures for my art school portfolio. And I also have to mention the Scott Livesey Galleries in Melbourne for their ongoing support and for commissioning my recent projects and performances.

The realization of exploring the physiological and psychological parameters of the body and from doing the earlier acoustical body amplification performances and visual body probes (between 1973 and 1975 I made three films of the inside of my stomach, colon and lungs, probing 3 metres of internal space) - was that the body was profoundly obsolete. This body with this form and with these functions is inadequate, empty of its own agency and performs largely involuntarily and habitually and now performs best as its avatar on the internet. We perpetuate outmoded mental and physical constructs of a body. In fact, the more and more performances I do the less and less I think I have a mind of my own nor any mind at all in the traditional

metaphysical sense. So although the English language necessitates that the body speaks as a subject, the “I” is understood as a convenient language construct that compresses a complex interaction between this body with other bodies, artifacts and institutions, at this time in history. The philosopher Ludwig Wittengstein asserts that thinking happens with the lips that you speak and with the hands that you write with. It doesn’t simplistically happen in your head. Friedrich Nietschze says that there is no being behind the doing. There is no doer behind the deed. There is only the act. In other words we assign agency to our acts only in retrospect.

Although art is for audiences, we contribute as artists in highly individual, particular and peculiar ways. The philosopher Marshall McLuhan asserted that art is anything you can get away with. Furthermore, Frank Zappa’s stated that art is making something out of nothing and selling it. Andy Warhol observes that an artist is somebody who produces things that people don’t need to have. And perhaps more profoundly, Henri Matisse revealed that he doesn’t paint things, he paints the difference between things. For me what is interesting is this slippage that occurs between intention and actuality. A process that is open to and incorporates accidents and generates surprise. Woody Allen adds if you are not failing every now and again, it’s a sign that you’re not doing anything very innovative. In fact I’ve made a career out of being a failure. Nothing that I do turns out the way I imagine it should. Art can be considered as a Kantian “ought” rather than merely as an “is”, thus inextricably meshing aesthetics with ethics. But art is an activity that doesn’t simplistically affirm and perpetuates acceptable values but rather it constantly generates uncertainty, anxiety and ambivalence. Artists operate not in realms of necessity but in realms of contingency. Artists are in the business of generating contestable futures. Possibilities that can be experienced and examined, interrogated, sometimes appropriated but most likely discarded. Art is not about quantifying the world but rather constructing qualitative experiences. Those that augment and enrich our personal and social lives. Art is an essential component of culture. And as the Greek philosopher Hippocrates was reputed to have stated “Life is short, Art is long”.

In this age of body hacking, gene mapping, prosthetic augmentation, synthetic blood, synthetic skin, face transplants, androids, artificial intelligence and artificial life, what a body is and how a body operates becomes problematic. Manga, medical and military constructs of the cyborg are only one possibility and can be contested. In fact, one can argue that in 2000 years time we might look exactly like we do now - externally. But the body internally might be radically different. We will be able to recolonize the human body with micro and nano-scaled sensors and machines. In fact, all technology in the future will be invisible because it will be inside the human body. And to conclude, the Science Fiction writer, William Gibson asserts that the future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed...