

REPERTÓRIO
LIVRE

BODIES IN DISSENT BETWEEN THE POLITICAL, THE PRIVATE AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL

*CORPOS EM DISSIDÊNCIA ENTRE O
POLÍTICO, O PRIVADO E O TECNOLÓGICO.*

*CUERPOS EM DISIDENCIA ENTRE LO
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ABSTRACT

This article builds on the issue of the body in performance as a means of identity construction, expression of dissent and definition of the private as political through examples of a few performance artists and live artists who use an embodied cognition framework in their performances, such as Lee Wen, Marilyn Arsem and Guillermo Gómez-Penã, among others. The works presented here communicate their meanings most powerfully when the performer is in direct and physical proximity with an audience or passer-by when the performance takes on the street. In recent times, in light of the pandemic and the closing of public spaces, people have had to resort to the digital to keep their work going in forced isolation. The backlash has rekindled the discourse on the massive use of technologies that have brought about a new crisis of representation with the ever-increasing distance from the reality of the referential world. In performance, it has caused a paradigmatic shift that has destabilized the concept of the presence of the performer, requiring a new positioning. The question the article raises concerns the surging deployment of high-tech devices in the performance art and Live Art domains and how they affect the understanding of the human body as a cognitive tool. In so doing, the author proceeds from resumed excerpts of his lecture “Bodies in Dissent” (for the students of the MA in performance practices at ArtEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, NL) to a recent conversation he had with Australian performance artist Stelarc about augmented realities, prosthetic insertions and interfaces in performance as new forms of interaction.

KEYWORDS:

performance art, dissent, identity, embodiment, technology.

RESUMO

Este artigo se baseia na questão do corpo na performance como meio de construção de identidade, expressão de dissenso e definição do privado como político por meio de exemplos de alguns artistas performáticos e artistas ao vivo que usam uma estrutura de cognição incorporada em suas performances, como Lee Wen, Marilyn Arsem e Guillermo Gómez-Penã, entre outros. As obras aqui apresentadas comunicam seus significados de forma mais poderosa quando o performer está em proximidade direta e física com um público ou transeunte quando a performance acontece na rua. Nos últimos tempos, face à pandemia e ao encerramento de espaços públicos, as pessoas tiveram de recorrer ao digital para manter o seu trabalho em isolamento forçado. O backlash reacendeu o discurso sobre o uso massivo de tecnologias que trouxeram uma nova crise de representação com o distanciamento cada vez maior da realidade do mundo referencial. Na performance, provocou uma mudança de paradigma que desestabilizou o conceito de presença do performer, exigindo um novo posicionamento. A questão que o artigo levanta diz respeito à implantação emergente de dispositivos de alta tecnologia nos domínios da arte performática e da Live Art e como eles afetam a compreensão do corpo humano como uma ferramenta cognitiva. Ao fazê-lo, o autor procede de trechos resumidos de sua palestra “Bodies in Dissent” (para os alunos do mestrado

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

performance art, dissidência, identidade, tecnologia,

em práticas de performance na ArtEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, NL) para uma conversa recente que teve com o artista performático australiano Stelarc sobre realidades aumentadas, inserções protéticas e interfaces em performance como novas formas de interação.

RESÚMEN

Este artículo se basa en el tema del cuerpo en la actuación como un medio de construcción de identidad, expresión de disidencia y definición de lo privado como político a través de ejemplos de algunos artistas de actuación y artistas en vivo que utilizan un marco de cognición corporal en sus actuaciones, como Lee Wen, Marilyn Arsem y Guillermo Gómez-Penã, entre otros. Las obras presentadas aquí comunican sus significados de manera más poderosa cuando el artista está en proximidad directa y física con una audiencia o un transeúnte cuando la actuación tiene lugar en la calle.

En los últimos tiempos, ante la pandemia y el cierre de espacios públicos, las personas han tenido que recurrir a lo digital para mantener su trabajo en un aislamiento forzoso. El contragolpe ha reavivado el discurso sobre el uso masivo de las tecnologías que ha provocado una nueva crisis de representación con el alejamiento cada vez mayor de la realidad del mundo referencial. En la performance ha provocado un cambio de paradigma que ha desestabilizado el concepto de presencia del performer, requiriendo un nuevo posicionamiento. La pregunta que plantea el artículo se refiere al creciente despliegue de dispositivos de alta tecnología en los dominios de las artes escénicas y las artes en vivo y cómo afectan la comprensión del cuerpo humano como herramienta cognitiva. Al hacerlo, el autor procede de extractos resumidos de su conferencia "Bodies in Dissent" (para los estudiantes de la Maestría en prácticas escénicas en ArtEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, NL) a una conversación reciente que tuvo con el artista australiano Stelarc. sobre realidades aumentadas, inserciones protéticas e interfaces en performance como nuevas formas de interacción.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

performance art, disidencia, identidad, tecnología.

WE LIVE IN A TIME IN WHICH CULTURE seems to surrender to technology. Different groups of power build consensus operating through manipulative ways of constituting subjects through misleading information they profess as new cultural forms. Inaccurate judgements based on spurious knowledge and expressed in the absence of sufficient data overtake wisdom. In several countries, nationalist and populist movements increase separation and division among people. Media outlets spread out half-baked opinions based on unexamined evidence without questioning their meaning or testing their truth. Prejudices that can be contested and disproved based on facts and careless oversimplifications – stereotypes that reflect narrow-minded views of the world continue to erode the fabric of democracy to preserve and protect acquired political positions of individuals and social organizations from unwanted changes.

In the late sixties and the seventies, in Europe and the Americas, artists began to focus on the body as a vehicle for artistic propositions: radicality, protest and subversion.

For instance, Antonio Manuel had a preeminent role in developing the cutting-edge neo-avant-garde movement that emerged in Rio de Janeiro during the most repressive years of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1968-1974). His artworks and actions instigated controversial debates concerning institutional censorship. In his raid action “O Corpo é a obra” (at the opening of the 19th

National Salon of Modern Art at the MAM, Rio de Janeiro, 1970), Manuel removed his clothing, climbed the MAM staircase, and hovered on the parapet of the museum's interior balcony exhibiting his naked body as a work of art to the public: a form of protest against institutional censorship later called "Experimental Exercise of Freedom."

The question of freedom of expression in affirming one's identity is a theme that often recurs in the performance. To do so, performance artists and live artists often operate dismantling biases and stereotypes as they are dull representations of reality linked to how often the human mind cannot acquire, analyze, and understand its complexity.

In that, exemplary is late Singaporean artist Lee Wen's series *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992–2012), one of his most famous and long-standing performances, a personal affront that turned politically provocative and condemning (Figure 1): "At the intersection of Asian art history, critical race theory, and migration and diasporic studies, one is never far (enough away) from the chromatic framing of race and ethnicity: yellow race, yellow peril, yellow face, the forever foreigner. (MING; WAI, 2019)



FIGURE 1 – Lee Wen,
*Journey of a Yellow
Man No. 11: Multi-
Culturalism*, 1997.
Courtesy: the artist.

Ground-breaking works against preconceived notions rooted in prejudices around race and gender are the seminal “Couple in the Cage” travelling performance that Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña performed together with Cuban artist and theoretician Coco Fusco (1993), in which they exhibited themselves as caged Amerindians from an imaginary island; and “The Living Museum of Fetishized Identities” (1999-2022) by La Pocha Nostra: a project that combined performance, videos, diorama installations and audience participation (Figure 2).

About this work, Gómez-Peña writes:

I believe in the power of decorating and aestheticizing the brown body in order to exaggerate, challenge and problematize mythical notions of the Mexican Other. In the American imagination, Mexicans are allowed to occupy two different but strangely complementary spaces: We are either unnecessarily violent, hypersexual, treacherous, cannibalistic and highly infectious; or innocent, ‘natural,’ ritualistic and shamanic. It’s the barbarian vs. the noble savage narrative replayed over and over again. Both stereotypes are equally problematic and colonizing. (GÓMEZ-PEÑA, 1997)

Prejudices, biases and stereotypes play a defensive function. They are a rigid set of negative beliefs that lead to acting unfavourably towards a specific group of people. They represent the cognitive core of preconceived opinions towards individuals, leading to incorrect attitudes when social relations have to be established. They are not formed by chance or by a momentary arbitrary choice. They are an integral part of the culture of social groups, as they are fashioned and used by individuals through a long process of interaction among them. Their consequence is that they lead to unjust treatments of different people concerning race, age, sex, disability, class, religion, political ideas, and lifestyles. Prejudices are linked to the affective factor: when we evaluate the resulting feelings, a behavioural factor follows, for which we discriminate unjustly, therefore imposing, abusing, violating, and becoming ourselves the cause of frictions and conflicts.



In general terms, performers conceive works focusing on the relationship between the individual, the self and society, questioning, among other things, the nature and role of inquiry of their practices, their purpose and fundamental unit of analysis. In so doing, live artists take risks and expose themselves as vulnerable to transform alienating conditions of socio-political marginalization and human rights violation into modes of self-actualization and self-legitimization.

American Marilyn Arsem's "Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping" performance from the "Spinning Tales" series (1992) is a work about women witch-hunted by patriarchalism and how much time forced domestic labour has consumed their daily lives throughout history (Figure 3). Since that same year, Mexican artist Rocío Boliver has created extreme body art artworks to denounce the repression of women in Mexico, often putting her own life at risk.

FIGURE 2 – Guillermo Gomez-Peña, *Museum of Fetishized Identities 'Post-Colonial Intellectual'*, Performance Space, Sidney (AU), 2001. Video artist Vahid Vahed. Courtesy: the artist and Performance Space.



FIGURE 3 – Marilyn Arsem, *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping, Mobius, Inc.*, Boston, MA (US), 1992. Photograph by Bob Raymond. Courtesy: the artist.

To speak of suffered injustices and condemn inequalities, discriminations, and oppressions that many others suffer and have suffered through performance art operations to open new territories of mutual understanding, reflection, dialogue, and reciprocity is a form of political activism. It is a productive way to express and ground dissent towards criminous offences and unfairness. In this regard, flawless is the participatory performances “Whip it good” (2013) by Jeannette Ehlers, a Caribbean diaspora visual artist born and based in Denmark, a work that delves into ethnicity, identity, colonization and slavery.



FIGURE 4 – Jeanette Ehlers, *Whip it good*, 3RD Venice International Performance Art Week, Palazzo Mora, Venice (IT), 2016. Photograph by Monika Sobczak. Courtesy: the artist.

Poetic and emotionally charged is French Gabonese Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro's "Last Sundance" (2016) ritual performance, where she passes bullets from her mouth to that of the spectator. A tribute to her ancestors, the work is of about two hours. Gradually, it becomes collective mourning in remembrance of the victims of the genocides that occurred in Africa by white colonizers.



African American artist and activist Preach R Sun's durational performance "For Whites Only" (2016) interrogates the nature and limits of freedom while posing a direct challenge to systems of oppression and injustice (Figure 6).

In Nigerian-born artist Chinasa Vivian Ezugha's one-to-one performance "Tongues" (2021), 'the need to speak' expands the inhabited space in togetherness.

Eventually, German artist Boris Nieslony's performance series "A Feather Fell Down" (2008-2015) was dedicated to people killed by other people, capital punishment, crimes against humanity, human rights injuries incurred by the State, femicide, genocide, ethnic cleansing, global wars, death by refused immigration, civil wars, massacres, mass-murder in more than 70 countries (Figure 7).

FIGURE 5 – Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, *Last Sundance*, 3rd Venice International Performance Art Week, Palazzo Mora, Venice (IT), 2016.
PHOTOGRAPH BY LORENZA CINI. COURTESY: the artist.



FIGURE 6 – Preach R Sun, For Whites Only, 3rd Venice International Performance Art Week, Palazzo Mora, Venice (IT), 2016. Photograph by Edward Smith. Courtesy: the artist.



FIGURE 7 – Boris Nieslony, A Feather Fell Down on Tirana, 2015, National Gallery of Arts, Tirana (AL). Photograph by Amanda Koliqi, GKA.

These works are also a call for a change, for they are change-constituents connecting art practices to constructing, saving, and preserving identities for freedom beyond biases that suffocate them.

In doing so, what emerges is that contemporary live artists working on identity and dissent are continually confronted with how to respond with their art to current states of emergency. However, how to perform in such contexts and express dissent constructively and identity accurately is a constant dilemma.

“Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible” (RANCIÈRE, 2015, p. 140). The word sensible comes from the Latin *sensibilis*: perceptible by the senses, a meaning that eventually evolved into having good sense, reasonable, done or chosen under wisdom or prudence; likely to be of benefit.

As humans and live artists, we embody the sensible because of our very constitutional nature. We are “embodiment of cognition” (the coming together of opposites qualities within) with the capacity of discernment and insight that allows us to refuse to accept being subjected to tenets, principles, norms, and rules that do not correspond to us as well as to laws that we perceive unfair. Additionally to this stance, artists that use performance art as an effective political tool (beyond its potential to touch people emotionally) work on shaping and protecting identity, contributing to a better society. In doing so, they propose and produce accretive knowledge. They strive and keep “the freedom at least to carve and chisel our own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion our own gods out of our entrails” (ANZALDÚA, 1987, p. 44) and to communicate to the others that possibility.

The study of embodied cognition originates from the philosophical investigation of the being and time (HEIDEGGER, 1962) and the essence of reason as a principle of being (HEIDEGGER, 1969). From the phenomenology of perception that spells out how the body plays a crucial role not only in perception but in speech and relation to others (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962) to the analysis of the structure and signification of human behaviour and consciousness, undertaking the Gestalt psychology notion of a whole being greater than its parts (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1963). From the radical empiricism by William James, who, in his essay “The Meaning of Truth” (1909), postulated that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience” (JAMES, 1987, p. 826) to John Dewey’s pragmatic

account of social practice. Dewey emphasized the importance of habits in organized human life, the role of philosophy as a means of improving daily life (CAMPBELL, 2019), and at the same time, recognizing the social nature of the self. (DEWEY, 1958) Analyze and explain how the human body shapes what the mind can do (GALLAGHER, 2005) is a primary characteristic of the embodied cognition and approach:

Western scientific culture requires that we see our bodies both as physical structures and as lived, experiential structures-in short, as both “outer” and “inner,” biological and phenomenological. These two sides of embodiment are not opposed. Instead, we continuously circulate back and forth between them. Merleau- Ponty recognized that we could not understand this circulation without a detailed investigation of its fundamental axis: the embodiment of knowledge, cognition, and experience. For Merleau-Ponty, as for us, embodiment has this double sense: it encompasses both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms. (VARELA; THOMPSON; ROSCH, 1991, p. XV-XVI)

For example, excelling in dance skills can be understood as tangible proof that the characteristic of the body of the dancers are not accidental to their mental abilities but define them in various intrinsic ways. The information processes that carry out our intelligent functions are regulated and distributed by the physical, chemical and biological compound that implements them (SHAPIRO, 2011). However, the methods and effectiveness of practical intelligence mainly depend on the perception a person has of the environment, the level of familiarity they have with it and the personal and interpersonal experiences conducted within it. In other words, the interactions between body, environment and social context act on the sensorimotor capacity of the individual while defining action opportunities, which the individual undertakes through perceptive, sensorial and motor engagement (RIETVELD, 2008). To note, in the field of radical embodied cognitive science, “cognition is to be described in terms of agent-environment dynamics rather than computation and representation.” (CHEMERO, 2009, p. X)

Furthermore, “Embodiment is the surprisingly radical hypothesis that the brain is not the sole cognitive resource available to us to solve problems. Our bodies and their perceptually guided motions through the world do much of the work required to achieve our goals, replacing the need for complex internal mental representations.” (WILSON; GOLONKA, 2013, p. 1)

When I facilitate performance workshops (working together with my partner, German artist Verena Stenke, as VestAndPage), I encourage the participants to find their “voice” interacting with other bodies and space. The relations that spring from such encounters provide chances to explore new individual and collective physical composition or even physical sound scores to develop cognition-kinetics. In this way, the participants partake in a performative system environment and generate mutual knowledge, thus assuming an active role.

In that sense, embodied cognition becomes very effectual also in educational and rehabilitative contexts. Implying that the body acts on the cognitive level and plays a fundamental role in learning new skills, the embodied approach, for instance, in Applied Drama and Social theatre working with non-professional actors, provides that quality of movement, kinetics, action, sounds and rituality become the founding nuclei to activate transformation processes. The aim is to implement body perception, relationship with the other and insight to qualify that same relationship.

Self-acceptance can lead to a more positive psycho-corporeal and emotional awareness while understanding and respecting the psycho-physical possibilities and limits each of us has. For example, when working with differently able people or young war refugees, if we value the stigmas and traumas connoting their body with radical loving-kindness, we realize that the body shapes the process of acquiring understanding through thought experience, the senses but also through what afflicts it. Affliction comprises physical pain, suffering, mental distress, depression, aching sensations of uselessness, social inadequacy, and apprehension to fail altogether and shapes the social factor. “The social factor is essential. There is no real affliction where there is no social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another. There is no real affliction unless the event which has sized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological and physical”. (WEIL, 2010, p. 39)

If I am asked why I perform, the answers can be manifold: by vocation, by way of urgency, in response to a particular situation gravity; or because performance helps me to explore another dimension of politics when reasons and language fail, or when anguish and fear overlap beyond them. Also, I perform because performance is an opportunity to fathom the depths of my being, and understanding better my being can lead me to new forms of expression and communication. My partner Verena Stenke performs because she is intimately driven to explicit her feelings (of being and existing) in a non-conventional way, for feelings germinate before concepts. Together, in the words of Joseph Beuys, we perform to show our wounds because they are the only currency we have. We perform to move to the place of our vulnerabilities to build trust and provoke reflection. The list can continue. Regardless of the answer we choose, when we perform, we cannot avoid projecting information and conveying to the other who we are because we rely on our bodies as primary tools of expression.

In short, what I do believe, as a performance practitioner, is that the body, each body, is the binding site of identity formation. However, the crucial question we have to ask ourselves is whether or not we choose our identity both by performing and in our everyday life. Is our identity out of our control, as it is a social construct? Is it part of a psychodynamic process or a complex combination of both?

Foucault debated that identities risk becoming subjected by regimes of knowledge, which often create policy ideas used to alter the situation for the sake of their particular interest and turn to be elitist over time. (RAINBOW, 1984)

Nevertheless, once seen as a more straightforward idea, the notion of 'identity' formed by heritage, social position, education, work, religion, and political beliefs, is becoming increasingly hard to pin down today. Structural changes have transformed contemporary society into fragmented cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality. The idea of "the self" has no stable inner core and is transformed continuously according to how it is addressed or represented in society. It is a self in the process, defined historically rather than biologically. It contains different identities that pull in different directions, putting a lot of stress and responsibility on the individuals and their choices in life.

Modern identities are increasingly no longer strictly determined by specific parameters as they were once, but as “unstable points of identification or suture made within the discourses of history and culture”. (HALL, 1990, p. 226)

Identity complicates our reflection on the new possibilities and heritage we have because it risks becoming dualistic. It is because it is squashed by the mash-up of cultures, detached from particular times, places, histories, traditions, and ancestry.

The effects and consequences of globalization, its deceitful slogan that everything is possible and at hand, impacted identities so that the old concept of identity has become fragile and haphazard. Especially in the younger generations, there is a widespread need to forge a new stable but flexible identity, not just to establish oneself amidst society but also to respond to our contemporaneity’s significant pressures and find alternative modes of existence.

Modern identities are no longer fixed in a liquid society constantly changing and transforming. “One becomes aware that belonging and identity are not cut in a rock, that they are not secured by a lifelong guarantee, that they are eminently negotiable and revocable; and that one’s own decisions, the steps one takes, the way one acts - and the determination to stick by all that - are crucial factors of both.” (BAUMAN, 2004, p. 11-12)

A single definition of identity would be imperfect because it would not touch the various ways we interpret identities today. As performers, the urgency of putting into question stale values and beliefs through our bodies and how we interact in reality is also because we need to shape our identities differently from the normative and the ordinary.

Live art and performance art practices function as forms of social action in multiple and different contexts. They spring from counterculture, cultural radicalism and alternative culture. They tackle identity as multi-faceted, rather complex, multi-layered, mutable and everchanging due to socialization processes and individual development (concerning self-consciousness and self-awareness) and not as the direct outcome of the hailing power of cultural representation. They democratize ways of thinking and

understanding that shape knowledge perception, deconstructing monolithic, stagnating taxonomies.

When we perform and question conventional standards about identity, we look for alternatives that can be healthy, proactive and functional to the rapid changes that affect contemporaneity. Categorizing identities for factors, components, elements, models, and distinctive characteristics is always incomplete. There is a substantially epistemological difference between what a subject makes, how it acts (assumption of roles), and the subject (the self). So, when we perform, we do not just resist the norm. We challenge the very idea of what is normal behaviour. (WARNER, 1993)

Thus, we take the opportunity to highlight the qualitative, meaningful differences that each human being carries within themselves through the art we make. We translate the fragmented beauty of our violated (inner) landscapes into performance with our bodies by exceeding bounds, shattering accepted patterns, advancing into unknown territory, and challenging the existing order. “Art is highly explosive. To be worth its salt, it must have in that salt a fair sprinkling of gunpowder.” (QUINN, 2008, p. 168).

In the current state of Live Art, there is a growing freeing from oppressive demands that go along with a quality of synthesis and confrontation within the plurality of individuals and the evolutionary formation of societies. Many of us live as cultural hybrids in places far from our country of origin. We search for new homes of belonging. We build new identities while understanding and embodying that autonomy, integration, and assimilation are ubiquitously, intimately woven into the fabric of our collective existence. So, performing comes into play as a way to honour concerns, differences, and the right to opacity (GLISSANT, 2010), giving value to our life stories and the other’s, expressing the necessity of mutual care and toleration and trust to encourage them in others. Eventually, as live artists, we should question impositions from a psycho-social perspective to embrace polarity and multiple facets of an increasingly intricate world without holding any more onto a status quo. We should explore the root of conflicts, not simply approach their symptoms. We should hearten empathy towards ourselves and others. We should favour togetherness and cherish individuality and self-actualization to

work out identities that reconcile to their destiny to walk into our future with hope and love.

Inhabiting time with conscience allows us to intensify the awareness of individual and collective change that springs from the urgency of finding new modes of shaping our life stories, all accepting aspects of one another. In that sense, the art of performance may rise as a powerful artistic practice to fuel continuous transformation while functioning as a form of social device to shape, communicate, confirm and respect the value of different, everchanging identities in multiple contexts.

Our history, environment, inner landscapes, and cultural background feed into the creative works we produce. Our identities exist in our corporeality and mind structures. Metaphorically, they consist of the same matter of our dreams, where everything co-exists in the very instant of its disappearance. However, a body takes on identity or more than one always. Identity cannot exist without a body. So, is identity a place we enter, or that of simply being what we are, every moment genuinely?

We reveal our identities every day by presenting ourselves publicly. However, how we engage with each other is often based on assumptions about others' potential identities presuming they fit in our cognitive schema, but they usually do not. There will always be something that we will not completely understand about others. (GLISSANT, 2010, p. 189).

At times, we shift between presentations of ourselves that we actively construct to other more unconscious manifestations of ourselves depending on our encounters with various people. We forge and shape our identity and defend it, dissenting and disagreeing with outdated parameters and norms that mean one's identity otherwise.

Dissent is an important right essential to democracy, for it implies fairness, respect, and equal treatment for everyone. "As long as a person does not break the law or encourage strife, they have a right to differ from every other citizen and those in power and propagate what they believe is their belief." (GUPTA, 2020)

Dissolving, disagreeing, and claiming one's own identity are not just political issues. There is also an implicit philosophical dilemma in them. Wittgenstein illustrated the aim of philosophy with an analogy: how to show a fly entrapped in a glass bottle the way out to get free. (WITTGENSTEIN, 1973)

The senses of the fly reveal the world to be all-encompassing but not to get out of the bottle. So, the fly cannot access that world outside the bottle. Instead, the fly keeps hitting the walls of its glass prison, not understanding the very nature of the barriers to freedom. So likewise, the senses can tell part of the world's truth but not all of it. Like the fly imprisoned in the bottle, we could express our identity in a thousand ways. Still, we would never be able to grasp it in its essence and extension as long as we cannot uncage ourselves from biases and prejudices that we all have, realizing how deep they inform our cognitive schemas. Instead, suppose we set ourselves free of all labels and suffocating judgements. In that case, we may begin to understand existence as a whole, perhaps identities as sameness and oneness, keys to access freedom. We would not ask ourselves with what charm or statement to dress ourselves today.

Performance art and Live Art are compelling means of claiming and defining our positions in this sense within society. At the moment in which we perform, we expose ourselves publicly. Thus, we must be aware that we are carving out free space to "cry our cry for poetry" (GLISSANT, 2010, p. 9), take stances, fight for the principles in which we trust, and express the concerns and urgencies that are most important to us with no hesitation. When we perform, we communicate, define and defend who we are and what we most believe in that precise moment. So, we should use well that moment – that short time we have. We should perform with self-awareness, that is, to act entirely within our capabilities to their pinnacle, mindful of every fact relevant to our existence to contravene standards, transgress the normative, counteract the status quo, and express our particular uniqueness. Eventually, to attain self-knowledge.

Within this perspective, questions such as "difference" and "diversity" should be understood as magmatic qualities of the subject, communicative signs, not as anomalies attributable to the norm or outside the norm, because it would be

to deny the poetic value of the notions of difference and diversity themselves. The reality, social contexts, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds all follow the traces of a Self-striving mutation to reconcile ethics with aesthetics, assuming that any definition due to language is limited.

Hence, “we need to keep silence within, be attentive, free from prejudice, inspired, able to contemplate to begin a process of liberation. These are difficult ways, of more perilous commitments, of actions often pondered in solitude, of fatigue and grief, where the only possible moral is the one we draw day by day inside the humbleness of our hearts and find ways to communicate to one each other amidst the ruins.” (NEIWILLER, 2002, p.172-173)

Performance art and Live art are relational practices based on the ethics of care. They result in transformative actions that tell of our human nature, holding tragedy and bliss at each side at hand.

We perform using our body as a primary tool of artistic creation throughout our reading and interactions with others and within a given reality. The body is like a membrane that encloses the vital flowing stream that traverses it and protects and reflects all those emotional, intellectual and spiritual tensions that constitute the being as a site from where new meanings spring. However, the body is also a space of silence and a place of forgetfulness, perception and discovery. Memory activation generates and sparks images in motion that emerge and echo from the roots of silence, like footprints in the water that still do not know how to walk. It is the same silence residing in the rusty cracks of an old metal beam, a scrap of cement, the fragility of a spider web, the vanishing of air, the texture of a sound, the rapidity or motionlessness of a gesture on the threshold between light and dark, and all those still unknown landscapes that invite us to search for their hidden, potential manifestations.

To perform dissent, existential conflicts, alienation, discomfort and how to react to them as ways to forge our identity through the creative use of the body is a dynamic process. Our use of time and space creates that dynamic that offers a value-free approach to level what the deceptive mind might see as troubled, diverse and different beyond the boundaries of body representation. It is an

opportunity to examine reality through the actual choices made by agents in practice – the artist who generously gives and provides. It stands out as an act of survival amid the debris of our societal systems to claim creative freedom: a freedom that is political, social, civil, individual, relational, intimate, and ultimately poetic.

From that perspective, Live Art provides a context of mutual sharing, a practice allowing for a non-casual synthesis between a plurality of self-biographies, different levels and modes of interaction and relationships to build mutual trust and self-reliance to co-exist together. Thus, as live artists and performers, we should not be shy to tune, confront, pull sharply, lay bare, uncover, hazard, assess, lay it on the line, hit for, strike down, ground, try out, tax to the limit, collect, edge and hive, lay down the arms, hammer away, get started, break into, scrutinize and step forth. We should surrender and let ourselves – our bodies - enjoy our present state of being, trusting that our fragilities and failures are part of our human nature.

Also, with the everchanging reality that confronts us every day, we discover how much our body is vulnerable, imperfect, fallacious or gets sick. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us realize how little is enough for our lives to change suddenly.

We had to keep physical distance from other people and also from our loved ones. We had to avoid crowding the usual meeting places and drastically reduce our contacts. Separation and isolation had become promises to keep our good health safe and that the spread of the virus itself contained. Strangely, forced segregation had become both therapeutic and an act of solidarity. In our current performance cycle, “1 9 Monologue” (2021-2022), we unfold our personal experience of being as a body home to pathogens while building a bridge between precise autobiographical self-observation and a global, historical and literary outside. We raise questions on how our bodies register all that, react and respond, assuming that the relationship between proximity and distance shapes human existence, as does how we approach distance (Figure 8).

We live and work through and with bodily contact as human beings and performers. It brings us into the physical realm. We grow a sensation of what kind of nearness

is harmful, appropriate, or pleasant throughout our lives. We learn techniques that protect us from injury. Establishing a distance between ourselves and everyday life, specific events, and other people is crucial for human interaction. However, how does it work with a prescribed distance? Or when is the renunciation of closeness forced upon us? Suppose mandatory spacing requirements become the nowadays solution. Does it mean that to remain isolated, avoid any physical contact, and not endanger oneself and others make us stop existing in a social community? To live without proximity in the long term may cause the atrophy of human desires. The absence of stimuli makes people more constrained. How do our bodies respond when movement, in-person encounters and a process of mutual exchange are taken away from us?

Furthermore, what happens to art when placed mainly in the digital space? When we only have a limited perception of it through our senses? We cannot relate to a work of art on a physical level, which we cannot approach or move away from, which we cannot access through sensation, emotion, smell or taste in association with movement and self-perception, which affects us at best, differently.

We have, however, tried, thanks to the technology, to operate within a dynamic system called distance during the lockdown, the ends of which are contact and loss of physical contact: isolation. The body aims to reduce the distance, responding to a particular need: meeting and gathering. Moreover, when the isolation absorbs, the body either adapts or tries in some way to deviate from it.



FIGURE 8 –
VestAndPage, 19
Monologue, Strangelove
Festival at Quarterhouse,
Folkestone (UK), 2021.
Photograph by
Chelsey Browne.
Courtesy: the artist.

As live artists and body-based performance artists, we understand reality with and through our body and its alleged manifestations: work, sweat, pleasure, and pain, which often have been defamed compared to the subtle bodies and its alleged manifestations: soul, mind, thought, intellect, knowledge. The human body is an active part of the cognitive process as a whole, in its totality: the only tool-parameter to read reality, albeit its reading will always be partial. Isolation complicates things for a performative work and also springs from collaborative processes. The word collaboration is dynamic, responsive, and situated, as the word freedom. Hence, we should consider how we, as live artists, connect and how we, as humans, connect to nature, society, other sentient beings, the non-human environment, human-made systems, and time. Eventually, how to dissect and present all that through our performance practices in spaces often conceived as places for artistic communities, inspiring other live artists to strengthen each other and become multi-contextual. Indeed, we become when we are together.

Even in the digital age, performing artists and live artists still need their physical bodies to create working situations and gatherings in shared spaces. It is just as in everyday life. Human beings cannot ignore the relationship with their body, the physical space, and the bodies of others. Life is the art of necessary encounters to give to and learn from others. So, how do our bodies respond to this new state

of things of increased precariousness? How can we join forces and create new spaces to nurture relational freedom, that one that sparkles from our bodies when we act not as isolated individuals? How do we place technology in the discourse around the human body as a cognitive tool? How does the digital affect our encounters and confrontation?

Eventually, if bodily presence is evidence of being alive, then the absence is a state to embody to stay alive. It sounds like a contradiction in terms, but critically, it proves to be somehow valid in examining the present situation. Thinking beyond the binary distinction of presence and absence to more technologically informed valuations of the being, if cyborgs and digital bodies indicate the integration of the human being with machines, from this perspective, the technological forms, usually related to the notion of absence, are assimilated into being. If the cyborg and digital bodies have modified new ways of thinking about representations and being and the relative concepts of absence and presence, do the physical (human) body benefit from it, or will it gradually lose importance and almost dematerialize, disappear in the end?

In a recent conversation I had with Stelarc (VESTANDPAGE, 2021) on the body and the technological within the pandemic, I asked him about the effects of the consequent massive use of the technology that it has brought about. Is the notion of corporeality as a “performatic tool” destined to collapse? Increasingly assimilated into digital devices and cognitive “prosthesis”, will the physicality of the performance be more and more mediatized and identities avatarized?

The Australian performance artist answered me that we need to rethink embodiment and question whether a biological body is adequate: if a body has access to streaming data; if a body can have access to online archives; if a body can reliably retrieve memories; if a body can sense and experience a broader electromagnetic spectrum, and if a body can maintain its performance and extend its lifespan, then perhaps we should consider such a body. Looking at Marshall McLuhan indicating that technology is the external organs of the body, we well may say that we have evolved as these soft biological bodies with internal organs to function in the natural world adequately. We need to engineer additional external organs to better interface with the technological terrain we inhabit.

About engineering internet organs, with particular reference to the extra ear growth from his stem cells (primitive cells not yet endowed with specialization but capable of transforming themselves into different types of cells in the body, with special functions) and surgically implanted on his left arm (Figure 9), Stelarc writes:

I have always been intrigued about engineering a soft prosthesis using my own skin, as a permanent modification of the body architecture. The assumption being that if the body was altered it might mean adjusting its awareness. Engineering an alternate anatomical architecture, one that also performs telematically. Certainly what becomes important now is not merely the body's identity, but its connectivity- not its mobility or location, but its interface. In these projects and performances, a prosthesis is not seen as a sign of lack but rather as a symptom of excess. As technology proliferates and microminiaturizes it becomes biocompatible in both scale and substance and is incorporated as a component of the body. These prosthetic attachments and implants are not simply replacements for a part of the body that has been traumatized or has been amputated. These are prosthetic objects that augment the body's architecture, engineering extended operational systems of bodies and bits of bodies, spatially separated but electronically connected. Having constructed a Third Hand (actuated by EMG signals) and a Virtual Arm (driven by sensor gloves), there was a desire to engineer an additional ear (that would be speak to the person who came close to it). The project over the last 12 years has unfolded in several ways. The EXTRA EAR was first imaged as an ear on the side of the head. THE 1/4 SCALE EAR involved growing small replicas of my ear using living cells. And recently, THE EAR ON ARM which began the surgical construction of a full-sized ear on my forearm, one that would transmit the sounds it hears. (STELARC, 2008)



FIGURE 9 – Stelarc,
Ear on Arm, 3rd
Venice International
Performance Art Week,
Palazzo Mora, Venice
(IT), 2016.
Photograph by Piero
Viti. Courtesy: Piero Viti.

With cyborgs and digital bodies, the body is in excess. It goes beyond the biological, both in form and function, both offline and online worlds. They provide alternate anatomical architectures to perform in mixed and augmented realities. These are not about enhancement, but rather, they are certainly experiments that interrogate what a body is and how it operates in the world and electronic media. The biological body is a body that generates presence, being in the here and now. In other words, with the physical presence and in a particular location. With the biological body, it is absent if it is not materially present in proximity. In the digital world, our physical bodies become phantom entities potentially ever-present in that they are accessible at any time online.

The question raised by Stelarc is of crucial importance for understanding the role of the body as a cognitive tool in today's highly hyper-technological world. For Stelarc, it is necessary to understand that speaking about "my body or your body" is simply designating this body or that body. Saying we have a relationship with our body perpetuates notions of internal agency and the Cartesian split of mind and body. We speak as an "I" or "you" for convenience in language of much more complex interactions and feedback loops between this body and other

bodies and objects. Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us that thinking need not be located inside our heads. Thinking happens with the lips we speak with the fingers we write or type. This body is a physiological, phenomenological interacting and aware body in the world. To be an intelligent agent, we need to be both embodied and embedded and appropriately responding in the world. What is essential is not what is inside us as single beings, but instead what happens between us, in the medium of language we communicate, in the culture we have been conditioned, in the social institutions that we operate in, at this point in history. So how our body performs and expresses its freedom is highly constrained and largely pre-determined. One can define a body by its encounters, collisions, and collaborations with other bodies. Particular bodies in particular places at specific times are not as important as we, as individuated bodies, would like to imagine in our lifetimes. Birth and death are evolutionary strategies to shuffle genetic material and for population control.

Our contributions are contingent and contestable. They are not necessary, we contribute, and then we become part of the cultural archive of our species. Nevertheless, we are curious creatures that generate desires to be something other than our biology. In this age of information overload, what is essential is not freedom of ideas but rather a freedom of form, freedom to modify our body with prosthetic attachments and implants, surgical and possible genetic intervention. This bipedal breathing body with a 1400 cubic centimetre brain in this form and with these functions is not only inadequate but profoundly obsolete. The human body is vulnerable to bacteria and viruses. It is soft and easily damaged. It often fatigues. Its organs malfunction. It has a limited lifespan of about 80 years in good health before it quickly deteriorates and then dies. So, do we accept the biological status quo, or do we consider its redesign?

For instance, the experimental aspects of robotics combined with bio-engineering in performance bring up a fundamental concept regarding biomaterials, that of biocompatibility, which is the ability of a material to act by determining an appropriate host response in a given application. And so, more broadly, to bioprocesses and chemical-molecular techniques to evaluate and modify mechanisms involved in the cellular regulation of genes, proteins and metabolites with biotechnological potential. Scientific progress, as it is happening, for example, regarding the

development of research on embryos in the field of medically assisted procreation techniques, will inevitably lead us to reconsider the meaning of our existence, and thus of life and death, as we understand them today.

With the in vitro fertilization and the prolonged preservation of frozen embryos, there is a de-synchronization of the human lifespan from our reproductive processes. We may be born when our twin is on her deathbed or from the body of another well after the death of our biological mother. We are now approaching a time of neither birth nor death. When we engineer an artificial womb and bring to bear a healthy child, then life would not begin with a biological birth. Furthermore, when we can replace malfunctioning body components with stem cell grown organs, 3D, bio-printed and artificial parts, we would need not die a biological death. So how do we define human existence, which neither begins with birth nor ends in death? In fact, we no longer die biological deaths. We die when our technological life support systems are switched off.



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PAGNES, ANDREA: Diretor artístico do VestAndPage, ao lado de Verena Stenke, multiartista, atua nas áreas de performance art, filmes permormáticos, dramaturgia e projetos artísticos comunitários.