

An examination of post-humanism and body obsolescence



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This paper will be discussing the ideas behind post-humanism and how it ties into Stelarc's philosophy of the body and its obsolescence. The information presented will help locate any inconsistencies in Stelarc's body of work, focusing mainly on his desire to use the 'obsolete' body to control technologically powered bodily enhancements. This creates conflict in the idea that the 'body' must have some control over that technology, while simultaneously surrendering control to that technology to enhance the body. Stelarc uses his art to help him constantly redefine the human body. Through definition of post-human philosophy Stelarc believes that humankind and technology are so entwined that in the future the 'obsolete' body will inevitably choose function over form " humanness will be defined by how a species operates—in other words, whether it processes information like a human, is sentient, empathic, intelligent, and such—rather than how it looks." (LaGrandeur) Technology is growing rapidly, especially with the development of smartphones, social media and the fact that it is accessible by almost everyone on the planet. With this steady advancement it will not be long until fusing technology with the human body is common practice in society. Stelarc has personally vested himself as a 'guinea pig' in a sense by creating an *Amplified Body*, *Third Hand* and an *Ear on Arm*, Stelarc is constantly trying to better himself with the advancements of each new technology. Does this mean Stelarc's work is a bit selfish in nature? Or is Stelarc in a way donating his body for the improvement and advancement of humankind?

Post-humanism is a tricky subject to define, most people immediately think of post-humanism as meaning the 'beyond human' or 'after human' and for <https://assignbuster.com/an-examination-of-post-humanism-and-body-obsolescence/>

the most part they are correct. Dr. Francesca Ferrando is an active lecturer and philosopher studying the post-human condition, she is currently teaching at New York University while independently researching Cyborg Theory with colleague/roboticist Professor Kevin Warwick. Ferrando's research of post-humanism has brought her to the conclusion that there are seven separate definitions surrounding this complicated subject. They are as follows: Anti-humanism, Cultural post-humanism, Philosophical post-humanism, the Post-human condition, Trans-humanism, AI takeover, and voluntary human extinction. (Ferrando 32) For the purposes of this paper we will be focusing on the trans-humanistic aspects of post-humanism, because the principles behind this movement wants to create technologies that could improve the human experience by enhancing our physical, psychological, and intellectual capacities.

Transhumanism is a way of envisioning the future that is based on the idea that humankind in its current state does not represent the end of our advancement but rather an early phase in our evolutionary process. Max More a futurist, philosopher, and consultant pertaining to emerging technologies, describes it clearly: " Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values." (More) Just like we use logical methods to improve humanity and the outside world, we can also use such methods to improve upon ourselves, the human being. In doing so, we are not restricted to the conventional humanistic methods, such as cultural and educational development. We can

also use technological methods that will ultimately enable us to move past what we would think of as “human”.

Stelarc was born in Limasol, Cyprus lives and works in West Melton, Victoria, Australia. (Mey 128) He studied at Caulfield College of Advanced Education and the Royal Melbourne College of Technology, Australia. Stelarc has performed and exhibited in Japan, Europe and the United States. As for today, he is continuing his research study at Curtin University in Western Australia, pioneering the way we explore the relationships between, technology, culture, and the human body. Through his exploration of these relationships, Stelarc conducts his research in a way that his work demonstrates a “poetical oscillation between the light of optimism and the shadow of aversion.” (Wilson 157) His works address the reconceptualization of the body, while exploring what the body may look like in the future when humankind discovers a deeper connection with technology, creating an avenue to replace the ‘obsolete’ with new technology.

One of Stelarc’s body-based exploration was his *Third Hand* (1980) project. For this Stelarc created a capable and touch-sensitive mechanical hand, building it in size and shape matching his right hand. The robotic limb attaches to Stelarc’s right arm and is controlled by signals sent by electrodes and sensors attached to various muscles in his body.

As with Stelarc’s suspension pieces, the performance of *Third Arm* presents Stelarc in the nude with the additional prosthetic. Stelarc’s nudity lures the audience’s attention to the attached wires, nodes, and machine-driven hand. While the mechanical prosthetic appears at first a contrast against Stelarc’s

flesh and hair, as the performance slowly progresses Stelarc creates the feeling that it is a cohesive extension of his bodily structure, as well as, emphasizing Stelarc's ongoing narrative of 'body obsolescence'.

In his work titled *Amplified Body* (1994), Stelarc employs a combination of sensors, robotics, and virtual reality equipment to his body to control multiple devices, such as an industrial robot arm, video cameras, and speakers. By just creating tension in his muscles, Stelarc can control, or move, at least one of these devices. For example, when the sensors detect tension in Stelarc's upper leg muscles, signals are sent to nearby computer that activate certain sound samples. Stelarc also uses sensors combined with medical equipment to monitor different types of muscles, finger pulse, and his heartbeat. When these sensors receive these signals, it triggers the computer to activate lighting effects, video cameras, sounds, and other various effects.

By combining technology with his body, Stelarc is highlighting his belief that the human body is now and has become completely obsolete. Stelarc's argues that humankind has entrenched itself with superior and intelligent technological advancements that seems hard to distance ourselves from, but it seems we live without: "Humans have created technologies and machines which are much more precise and powerful than the body. . . . Technology is what defines being human. It's not an antagonistic alien sort of object, it's part of our human nature. It constructs our human nature." (Wilson 159)

Stelarc is claiming that technology is human nature, but what does this mean to him? Isn't it human nature to feel empathy, or love, or to be

intelligent? It feels like Stelarc is trying to communicate the concept that <https://assignbuster.com/an-examination-of-post-humanism-and-body-obsolescence/>

ever since the introduction of technology humanity hasn't been without it and that technology has always been part of our lives even if it is detrimental.

During his years as a professor at Curtin University in Perth, Stelarc first had the idea to grow a 'third ear' in 1996, only a year after Robert Langer of M. I. T (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Charles Vacanti of Harvard University successfully replicated the world's first artificial ear on the back of a mouse. It took nearly ten years for Stelarc to raise the required funds to create an extra ear of his own, and to find a team of surgeons even willing to fathom Stelarc's vision, let alone perform the unconventional procedure. During an interview pertaining to the development Stelarc's *Ear on Arm* project he stated that " Had I found surgeons in 1996, it probably wouldn't have resulted in the state-of-the-art surgical construct it is now." (Dayal) Stelarc had some cartilage tissue from his rib cage removed, and he used it as a building block to create the structure of a left ear, then putting it into his own skin in order to encourage the growth of the tissue and the formation of blood vessel for assimilating the 'third ear' with his body.

Today, the 'third ear' is a permanent part of Stelarc's fore arm, having fused the biologically compatible framework of the ear under Stelarc's skin into its own tissue and blood supply. Stelarc aims to grow an ear lobe from his stem cells to raise the organ further off his arm creating a more realistic looking ear. The final phase will be to insert a wireless microphone that will let curious voyeurs around the world tune into Stelarc's third ear, allowing them to eavesdrop at any time. Stelarc explains in an interview with ABC News: " If I'm not in a wi-fi hotspot or I switch off my home modem, then perhaps I'll be <https://assignbuster.com/an-examination-of-post-humanism-and-body-obsoletion/>

offline, but the idea actually is to try to keep the ear online all the time.”

(Bembridge) A microphone was positioned in the third ear but developed an infection that ended an otherwise successful trial.

Could it be possible that someday this third ear could actually hear anything Stelarc hears, and people could record the sound from the ‘third ear’ letting anybody and everybody hear the sounds received? Maybe someday this technology can be applied to the biotechnology field or medical research, for example, if we could insert a chip into human’s head to record their memories and extract the information to a computer for further analysis or archival purposes. In that context the *Ear on Arm* project is not a ridiculous or useless idea, it is just one that is beyond our physical lifetime. “I am particularly interested in that idea of the post-human, that idea of the cyborg,” Stelarc stated in an interview with CNN. “What it means to be human will not be determined any longer merely by your biological structure but perhaps also determined largely by all of the technology that’s plugged or inserted into you.” (McCafferty) The value of this work could influence more and more people not only in the field of art, but also in the field of medicine. Stelarc’s *Ear on Arm* exemplifies technology as an extension of the body, exploring the concept of technology as a ‘symptom of excess’ and can be considered a technology that enhances or redesigns the body.

While Stelarc is in favor of technology as being only an extension of the body, much of the work being done in the field of robotics seeks to ultimately create a new body, a mechanical body that in the future could render the organic living body outdated. This creates an intense debate around the question of whether developments in robotics are overall beneficial or

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detrimental to the human condition. There is this concept that technological advancement is equivalent to progress, however can our dependence on technology be considered real progress or are we unintentionally condemning ourselves to a future in which we as human beings are superfluous? Is further progress a grand illusion? The critical question here is at what point do we become too trusting of technology?

These questions that Stelarc raises is what makes his work so fascinating; Stelarc makes us reexamine the limitations of our bodies and further examine the role that technology has within our lives. In the context of the cultural and social, it might be a while before us human beings begin assimilating technology into ourselves. Nevertheless, since it seems like humanity is slowly advancing to the point where technology will essentially become a part of us, will there be a time in the future where the addition of technology in our bodies will become standard? Stelarc explains: “ It’s not interesting to simply speculate that there will be a better state-of-the-art device to use in 10-15 years’ time. There are always going to be constraints; there are always going to be limitations to what any technology will do. But it’s the idea that is what’s potent.” (Dayal)

In relations of medicine, technology, and the body, the use of artificial organs is seen as a decent use of this type of integration since it is saving the life of a person. It appears people are more comfortable with this type of assimilation, while the type of enhancements that Stelarc installs seem to be only for the goal of bettering himself, as seen in his work *Amplified Body* where he attempts to attain some type of control over technologies by using his body. Is humankind entering a post-humanistic future where the <https://assignbuster.com/an-examination-of-post-humanism-and-body-obsolescence/>

entwining of technology and the body will stop being seen as a last resort to survival? And will humankind focus on more selfish uses such as trying to augment our body's processes through the discovery of future technologies?

Throughout Stelarc's body of work he has successfully proven that the human body is nearing 'obsolescence' and that present and future technologies can and will assist the advancement of humankind. His earlier works were rudimentary in nature but have evolved over time into a viable option for future artists and scientists to take reference from. As technology advances so do Stelarc's trans-humanistic ideas and philosophies. He has not lost sight on what he set out to accomplish nor has he strayed from or limited himself in the process.

Annotated Bibliography

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Dayal, Geeta. "For Extreme Artist Stelarc, Body Mods Hint at Humans' Possible Future." Wired, Conde Nast, 2 May 2012, [www. wired. com/2012/05/stelarc-performance-art/](http://www.wired.com/2012/05/stelarc-performance-art/).

Francesca Ferrando, Francesca. "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms Differences and

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Relations.” *Existenz*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2013, pp. 26–32., [www. existenz.us/volumes/Vol. 8-2Ferrando. pdf](http://www.existenz.us/volumes/Vol. 8-2Ferrando.pdf).

This journal entry critically analyzes the term “ Posthuman” and uncovers the truth about how vast the term really is. Dr. Francesca Ferrando, a renowned philosopher, lecturer, researcher, and teacher of posthumanism at NYC. Her research in this journal entry identifies and explores the differences between posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms. Giving each term its own clear definition to better understand the vast concept of the term “ Posthuman”. This journal entry does a beautiful job of getting right to the heart of the part of posthumanism I want to compare with Stelarc’s philosophies. Dr. Ferrando does a great job at putting words to a very complicated subject and making it understandable to me. Her analysis on the ‘ Posthuman’ will be a vital reference to my overall paper helping me piece together any questions or observations on Stelarc’s posthumanism philosophy seen throughout his work.

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McCafferty, Georgia. “ The Man with an Ear on His Arm.” *CNN, Cable News Network*, 13 Aug. 2015, [www. cnn. com/style/article/stelarc-ear-arm-art/index. html](http://www.cnn.com/style/article/stelarc-ear-arm-art/index.html).

Mey, Kerstin. *Sculpsit: Contemporary Artists on Sculpture and beyond*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. 1

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This collection of critical essays and artist interviews was originally part of a series of journals named *Transcript*, established by the late Alan Woods in 1994 with the support of the School of Fine Art, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, a Faculty of the University of Dundee. The focus of *Transcript* is aimed at the documentation of contemporary working practices including their wider cultural implications and impact on the spectators by focusing on the voice of the artist. *Sculptist* focuses specifically on the documentation of contemporary modes of expression in the 'expanded field' of sculpture. This book was included because the interview it contains may not be entirely about all the works I am referencing in my paper but contain some views from Stelarc about his philosophy on posthumanism, intimate details on his performance pieces of the late 1990's and is an overall deep conversation about his process.

More, Max. "TRANSHUMANISM" Transhumanism: A Futurist Philosophy, 29 Oct. 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051029125153/http://www.maxmore.com/transhum.htm>.

Smith, Marquard, and Julie Clarke. *Stelarc: The Monograph*. MIT, 2007.

This book was carefully created after 10 years of closely studying and tracking the evolution of Stelarc's artwork, by Dr. Marquard Smith, whom is active in academia, curation, and research/publications that contribute to arguments in contemporary art and visual culture. In *The Monograph*, Smith felt that other sources such as fellow writers and academia/scholars from around the world would blend a variety of perspectives, arguments, and critical approach to properly engage, question, and make sense of Stelarc's

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work. The Monograph does this in a way that celebrates Stelarc's work while simultaneously questioning his work's condition of possibility. This book is the perfect reference tool for my paper because, it follows Stelarc's career from 1968 - 2005, it gives me a very intimate view, from many different perspectives of all the works I am reflecting on in my paper.

Wilson, Stephen. Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003: 156-159. 6