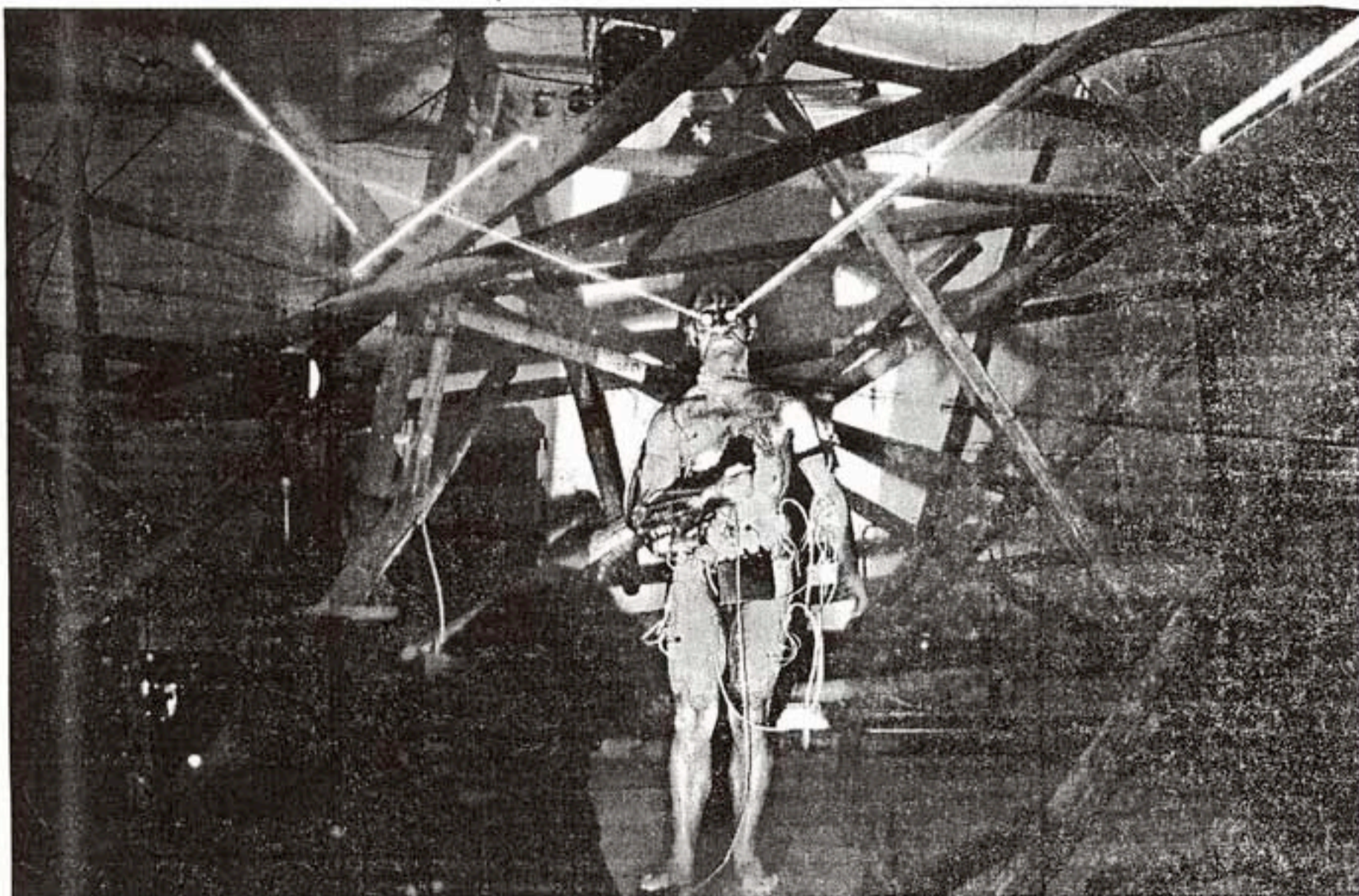


# Modem operandi

Performance artist Stelarc's body becomes one with the Internet



Stelarc submits his bare flesh to "Amplified Body, Laser and Third Hand" at Makai Gallery in Tokyo.

By Mary Thomas

Tomorrow night at the Wood Street Galleries, internationally known performance artist Stelarc will hook up his body to the Internet during "Parasite," a complex sensory exploration of impulse, response and motion.

Visualize your nervous system, sensors in a fine-lined network catching stimuli and instigating reaction. Picture a similar structure gathering information on the Internet. By devising methods to tap into the Net, Stelarc has constructed "a kind of virtual nervous system for the body."

The Australian artist is a research fellow at the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University whose residency is funded by the Vira I. Heinz Endowment. He's just returned from well-received presentations of this new work in Europe and Australia, and will perform it in Poland next week.

Stelarc (a combination of the first letters of his birth name, Stelios Arcadiou) says the body's "obsolete" and can't keep up with the overload and pace of the information age. By redefining and expanding physical boundaries he's showing that the possibilities are global, and beyond; there are no limitations.

Most recently his work has involved computers, the contemporary symbol of speed and power that has replaced the Impressionist's locomotive as the measure of our species' shortcomings.

Stelarc doesn't view this widening gap between biological and electronic minds with angst but rather has a contagious enthusiasm

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about discovering ways to break old molds and thrive within the new paradigm.

What one will see at Wood Street, then, is a man wired to the future. "Search engines" will select images from a library of 40 to 60 Web sites he's chosen. Data from those images will activate a muscle stimulator that will direct low-level voltage to electrodes attached to his limbs, generating involuntary motion.

Because these performances are so technically complex, Stelarc often provides handouts that list equipment. Although he's said in the past that technology is a strategy for him, the point is to not allow it to obfuscate perception of the experience.

Other machines will amplify physical sounds such as heartbeat, and project the performance from alternate viewing angles. He'll activate a strapped-on "third hand" by signals from leg and abdomen muscles.

But there is also an aesthetic at work and the artist wants the viewer to experience "beautiful images and color and sound. I'd be very disappointed," he said, "if one were to walk in off the street and that [aspect] didn't grab you." One can't easily overlook the

physicality of the piece, the way the wire-draped nudity challenges and embellishes one's understanding of the human body. There is sensuality and vulnerability in this combining of flesh and technology, a liberation and a bondage.

Stelarc sees this as "more structural than sensual," stressing the pragmatism of bare skin where there are so many attachments to be made. When pressed he does admit to a "kind of intimate relationship of the wiring to the body" and says that some may see the involuntary and intuitive movements as sensual.

Also, since he can be receiving information from 20 to 30 feedback loops at a time, there is that component of "a sensory overload, a sensual indulgence."

During performances it's important to him to "be open to the experience rather than preconditioned by old categories and desires. When the performance reaches a certain level, who is in control is no longer an issue. The body becomes a sort of extended operational system."

Through his use of the Internet "electronic space becomes a medium of action rather than information."

By allowing the body to be remotely accessed and actuated, he "deconstructs the notion of what it means to be a free agent." He makes clear that this "doesn't subsume you as an individual — you're enhanced. You can experience a collective consensual kind of reality."

He emphasizes that he's "not trying to sound mystical" or "spiritual in the old metaphysical mean-

ing," and would rather viewers be open to discovery without categorizing.

Stelarc's become somewhat a neologist out of necessity to describe his concepts. Discussions are peppered with references to "the body" (a sculptural object) as a "host for remote agents" or as being "Internet uploaded." He does this with a poet's sensibility so that terms that are practical and technical are often simultaneously descriptive and fanciful.

He received some notoriety for his suspensions, ended in 1988, during which he hung his bared torso from hooks inserted into the skin. When the body was raised, the painful stretching of the skin was noticeable but his demeanor was placid. The mental discipline had to match the physical. It appears Stelarc has always probed the expansiveness of the mind through the three-dimensional metaphor of the body.

Take this opportunity to see him perform; the next time you meet up may be on the World Wide Web.

Mary Thomas is a free-lance art critic for the Post-Gazette.

## 'PARASITE'

The free event is continuous between 5 and 8 p.m. (come and go as you wish) tomorrow at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. Call 471-5605.