A Portrait of the Artist as a Work in Progress

By STEPHEN T. ASMA

In this age of cloning, genetic engineering, and neuropharmacology, a new breed of "posthuman" artist is emerging. A handful of forward-thinking, slightly lunatic artists are exploring the increasingly fuzzy boundary between technology and the biological body.

"Posthuman" -- a term my students introduced me to -- refers to a loosely knit group of contemporary technological, artistic, and philosophical ideas. Some of my students have even argued that Plato's ascetic hostility toward the body is similar to the new posthumanist belief that we will eventually transcend our frustratingly finite flesh. But, the students point out, we won't have to wait for an afterlife to achieve this liberation; we will attain it by the application of new technology.

According to the posthuman pundits, technology will usher in a superior life for our species. Through technology, we will no longer be limited by the spatial and temporal constraints of our corporeal self.

For instance, Kevin Warwick, a professor of cybernetics at the University of Reading, in England, states: "I was born human. But this was an accident of fate -- a condition merely of time and place. I believe it's something we have the power to change." To that end, he has implanted microchips in his body that communicate to computers in his lab, which respond by flipping on lights and opening doors when he approaches. He and his wife, Irena, plan to get his-and-hers implants that will send signals back and forth between computers and their nervous systems. Soon, he says, they will attempt to download and swap digital versions of their personal sensations and emotions. "The way she puts it," Warwick explains in a February 2000 article in Wired magazine, "is that if anyone is going to jack into my limbic system -- to know definitively when I'm feeling happy, depressed, angry, or even sexually aroused -- she wants it to be her."

The distinction between our physical self and our cyberself -- stretched in all directions by Internet nodes and ubiquitous microprocessors -- will some day blur irreversibly, the posthumanists explain. Our bodies will be accessorized with hardware and software improvements, our minds ready for uploading and downloading. Our intellectual aspirations will no longer be hindered by the wet sacks we currently call home.

Of course, that's all rather unsettling if one happens to feel a certain nostalgia for that ol' wet sack, with all its flaws. And one might wonder whether the concept of a truly disembodied self is even a coherent notion. But some contemporary artists are not waiting around to find out. They are already embarking on technological self-enhancement.
In a couple of years, in an operating room in Japan, the French performance artist Orlan will conclude her 10-year work-in-progress titled "The Reincarnation of St. Orlan" by having a team of plastic surgeons construct the largest nose that her face is capable of supporting. Under a local anesthetic, Orlan will lecture on postmodern theory, reading from Beaudrillard, Kristeva, and Lacan, while surgeons flay her face and perform her rhinoplasty.

You may be thinking: So that's how I can stay awake at M.L.A. panels! Or: Maybe she'll chicken out. Please note, however, that she has already done this sort of thing 10 times. In New York, Orlan had plastic structures implanted under the skin of her forehead so that it would approximate that of Leonardo's "Mona Lisa." In another operation, she had her chin reconstructed on the model of Botticelli's "Venus." While these operations are performed, she is dressed in outlandish costumes and her audience asks questions of her via fax machine, phone, and e-mail. When the surgeries are completed, the excess bits of skin and fat are stored in jars for display at future performances.

Orlan is not an escaped mental patient. She is a respected member of the international art community, displaying herself and her work at the Pompidou in Paris and touring England recently with a show titled "This Is My Body, This Is My Software." She is supported by grants from France's Ministry of Culture. The art world has embraced this controversial play of nature and technology with open arms.

What does it all mean? As with most other controversial art, one can't be sure, so I asked my students to make sense of it for me. Many of them are heavily pierced -- tongues, bellybuttons, eyebrows, chins, and parts not generally visible in the classroom setting. It was clear to my students that Orlan's fusion of biology and technology is not simply a matter of vanity.

One student suggested that Orlan's work must be an expression of postmodernism, with its penchant for combining earlier traditions. Orlan is giving herself a postmodern face.

Others said the artist was expressing herself through fashion, but instead of clothing as the medium, she was using her own flesh -- she just happened to like the "Mona Lisa," and so on.

Some students argued that Orlan was criticizing the way culture forces women to submit to cosmetics. But others rebutted that point, arguing that Orlan had turned herself into a commodity -- a product for sale -- and that such a decision negated, or at least undermined, any such cultural criticism.

And, of course, there was a contingent of students who rolled their eyes, pronouncing Orlan a "kook" and a "head case."

Orlan's own cryptic assessments of her work aren't all that helpful. "My work is not against plastic surgery, but against the dictates of beauty standards which are impressed upon our bodies," she says. "Skin is a mask, a source of strangeness, and by reforming my face, I feel I'm actually taking off a mask. My work is carnal, inasmuch as it deals with flesh; it is blasphemous."
To some viewers, Orlan is indeed blasphemous. One of my students said she could not support Orlan's project, because it was like "playing God" to rearrange the face or body that God had given you. For this student, there was something sacrosanct about the "natural" state of affairs.

Maybe she's right, but it seems too late to raise that objection. The "natural" state of affairs is already increasingly the product of human intervention. Our tomatoes are genetically engineered to ripen sometime after the apocalypse, our corn is designed to detassel itself, and human beings walk around with pig-valved hearts.

The posthuman artist Stelarc takes a slightly different approach to the interface between biology and technology. This performance artist, who receives support from the Australia Council Visual Arts and Craft Board, fuses his own body with electrical/digital technology. He uses medical, robotic, and virtual-reality systems to explore and extend the body's boundaries. He has acoustically and visually probed his body, amplifying his brain waves, heartbeat, blood flow, and muscle signals, and filming the insides of his lungs, stomach, and colon. He augments the capabilities of his body through interfaces with prosthetics and computer technology.

One of Stelarc's early works was his "Stomach Sculpture." First he built a finger-sized capsule that contained a camera. Next he fasted for a day to remove food from the gut. And then he piped the capsule down his gullet -- tethered to a computer cable and an external control box. Once that was inserted into the stomach, it moved about and illuminated diodes by external control. An image of the whole procedure was transmitted by video monitor. Other sculptors might hammer their thumb while working, but Stelarc, according to his Web site, had other difficulties. "Even with a stomach pump," he reported, "excess saliva was still a problem, necessitating hasty removal of all the probes on several occasions."

Again the burning question: Why do this? And again, no clear answer, although this time, the artist's statement is at least a bit easier to follow: "The idea was to insert an artwork into the body -- to situate the sculpture in an internal space. The body becomes hollow, with no meaningful distinctions between public, private, and physiological spaces. The technology invades and functions within the body not as a prosthetic replacement, but as an aesthetic adornment. One no longer looks at art, nor performs as art, but contains art. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul, but simply for a sculpture."

My personal Stelarc favorite is his "Ping Body." In one performance, audience members in Paris, Helsinki, and Amsterdam were electronically linked through a Web page with a video feed to Luxembourg, where Stelarc stood with wires and circuitry dangling from all parts of his body. Those wires, which were muscle-stimulation contacts, were fed into a central computer, and audience members from around Europe were invited to manipulate Stelarc's body from their remote locations.

There is something phenomenally strange about this: A person stationed thousands of miles away can push a button and make another person's arm go up in the air.

These posthuman artists are certainly provocative, but they also seem a little narcissistic. There's
something self-indulgent about making one's body into a canvas for public experimentation. Both Stelarc and Orlan go by celebrity-style single names. But as long as the artists are willing to exploit themselves, I don't feel too bad about exploiting their art to reflect on the philosophy of body technology.

One of the reasons that it's difficult to make sense of Orlan and Stelarc is the confusion in their work between means and ends.

When technology serves some engineering purpose or solves some practical puzzle, its role as tool is clearly defined. For example, as I write this sentence on my word processor, the computer technology slavishly follows the parameters that lead to effective typing and storing of data. The computer is a means toward my goal of writing an essay. But in Stelarc's "Ping Body," the technology is almost an end in itself. He is playing with technology rather than pressing it into service for some other purpose.

The means/end distinction, or lack thereof, seems central to Orlan's projects, too. Plastic surgery and body implantation is technology that's becoming cheaper, more widespread, and more acceptable in popular culture; the public now expects celebrities to be "accessorized" in this way.

When I asked my students to compare Orlan with another plastic-surgery aficionado, Cindy Jackson, however, they were quick to draw an important means/end distinction. Jackson is an American woman who, in the past 10 years, has had 29 operations to transform herself into that cultural icon of beauty, the Barbie doll. When she was 34, her father died and left her a sizable inheritance, which she straightaway began to invest in her face-to-be. She had surgery to remove the bags under her eyes, she had implants put into her cheeks, her chin chiseled, her eyes enlarged, her makeup colors permanently tattooed, her jaw broken and sawed shorter, and so forth.

Most of my students said there was a significant difference between Orlan and Jackson: Both employed the same cutting-edge medical technology, but while the means were comparable, the ends differed greatly. When asked why she is reconstructing herself to look like Barbie, Jackson replies that it is for power: "I used to seek pleasure from men, and now they seek it from me. ... This is the ultimate feminist statement. I refuse to let nature decide my fate just because I missed out on the genetic lottery."

I'm not sure if that is pathetic, refreshingly honest, or both. Orlan, in any case, has a different goal. It is more abstract, more philosophical; it is less personal and, indeed, less understandable than Jackson's. In any case, the students felt quite sure that Orlan's goals were somehow more legitimate. The double-edged sword of plastic surgery, students argued, is good for Orlan because her goals are intellectual.

I'm not so sure; I feel less confident about that tidy distinction. Perhaps both Orlan and Jackson are artists, but one of them has not acknowledged that yet. Orlan has expressed interest in meeting Jackson, but Jackson refuses and is confused by the "artist" designation that some want to give her.
Can you be an artist and not know it? Unclear. Can you be a kook and not know it? Doubtless. At any rate, Orlan and Stelarc know that they are artists -- ones who shape themselves instead of clay, marble, metal, paint, or wood. Freud said technology is our way of becoming prosthetic gods. But that's old news to artists, who have always been obsessed with creation and have had God complexes all along.

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