

ANAT SPECTRA 2022 :: Multiplicity – Live – Episode 5

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Hello everyone

It is my absolute pleasure to participate in this Episode of ANAT SPECTRA 2022 :: *Multiplicity* – Live – here on the custodial homelands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

My name is Megan Kelleher. I'm a Vice Chancellor's Indigenous Pre-doctoral Fellow at RMIT University, in the Digital Ethnography Research Centre or DERC and I belong to the Barada and Kabalbara peoples from Central Queensland. I've been living here in Naarm, on Wurundjeri and Bunerong Country for about 27 years. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people and the Bunerong people as the traditional custodians of the lands on which I live and work – and sincerely pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging – and I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the lands that *you* call home, whether you are joining us here in person, or via video link in this technology-enabled hybrid event that is distributed across time and space.

And it is fitting, for we are gathered for this episode – Episode 5 – *Friends are Electric* – to consider the boundaries, the connections, the relationships and distinctions between the machine and the human, the cyborg and the avatar, the virtual and the tangible realms where we carve out our lives and our identities. We do this not to arrive at answers, but to generate questions that will lead us toward a Better, Fairer, more Just and Sustainable world.

I am honoured to moderate a discussion with Australian performance artist and provocateur Stelarc, whose internationally acclaimed career spans five decades, and - through interactions with robotics, prosthetics, medical instruments, Virtual Reality systems, the Internet and biotechnology - delves deeply into explorations of the limits and possibilities of the human body and its relationships -- with and through *“The Machine”*. Please welcome Science Gallery Artist in Residence, Stelarc.

It is also my privilege to be in conversation with one of the Top 40 Under 40 Most Influential Asian-Australians 2021, co-founder of Club Media, an entertainment company leveraging emerging technologies to innovate content, IP and experiences across Asia-Pacific, an *immensely* accomplished human being, entrepreneur, musician, creative director, film-maker, promoter, nightclub founder and specialist in youth culture – Reggie Ba-Pe III. Welcome Reggie.

To kick us off, we're going to watch two short videos:

The first is [“Like You”](#) a video by Maie a transcendental being finding her place and voice in our world.

The second video is called [“Re-Wired / Re-Mixed : Event for Dismembered Body”](#).

If you could, please play the videos, Thanks Louis

VIDEOS

I'd like to begin the discussion by drawing on the work of Kombumerri academic Dr Mary Graham, who in her plenary on Indigenous conceptions of Governance says "There is not one philosophy that dominates in an Aboriginal worldview except this idea of our relationship to the land. It's common to all groups." She says, 'Where in the Western worldview that states "I **think** therefore I am", An Aboriginal person would think "I am **located**, therefore I am."' Stelarc, your fascinating, exciting and challenging work, explores – and even resists this relationship between locatedness and "*being*" and – in the exegesis for *Rewired* it reads "The body was tethered in place. In fact, tethered to three different places. Effectively its upper body was elsewhere. Its lower body was grounded and located in place. ... The artist becomes optically and acoustically de-synchronized and performs partly involuntarily. It is as if the body has been electronically dismembered, spatially distributed and possessed with multiple agencies." From that starting point, I'd like to open the conversation by asking you to respond to this notion of "I am located therefore I am" – what do concepts like "belonging" and "identity" mean when networked digital technologies allow us to be effectively distributed across time and space?

DISCUSSION

At the other end of the corporeal spectrum, Reggie, is your work with Avastar – another fascinating set of projects harnessing emerging digital technologies like machine learning, and the metaverse – where identity and belonging is "virtually" untethered – and even placeless. From an Indigenous perspective – people's identity is embedded in the land – or as Mary Graham says, it goes deep in the land – there's a haptic relationship with place. You've lived in many places Reggie, so understand the cultures of a variety of places – in particular Shanghai where you lived for 8-9 years, creating communities and harnessing cultures in a place like Shanghai whose collective identity is evolving at speed. How does a being like Maie conceptualise her identity and sense of belonging – what does she conceptualise as her place?

DISCUSSION

In her seminal work, *Cyborg Manifesto* Donna Haraway writes "The cyborg would not recognise the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust." As a custodian of ancestral lands where there's a shedload of mining and resource extraction, I would argue that the cyborg is very much made of mud – minerals etc – and *will* eventually return to dust along with all of us mortals. Maybe more slowly – or if the current rate of planned obsolescence is anything to go by – at speed! What are the considerations that you both explore in your work, in relation to concepts like "sustainability" and ecological impacts that might stem from e-waste and the like?

DISCUSSION

Reggie, as a conduit – arguably a merchant of Possible worlds and future imaginaries – you're at the coalface of the rapid transformation of creative economies where innovations like blockchains, smart contracts and NFTs are beginning to bridge the "gap" between the virtual and the physical realms. Without getting too technical, can you tell us about some of the work you've been doing that blurs the boundary between the digital worlds and the physical realm.

DISCUSSION

Stelarc, I feel like in these considerations of our collective relationships with technology, machines, digitalisation, there's a tension between surrender/control. And your life work has leaned into that tension. In our conversation yesterday, you mentioned the concept of oscillating between modes –

and that these possible worlds are not negating or replacing the other. Can you tell us more about that?

DISCUSSION

Stelarc, I'd like to refer back to some of your earlier work – the suspensions in particular – and bring that work into dialogue with Reggie and in particular the avatar Ruby9100M and her song, *Screaming* – to set up a kind of dialectic between your works... So, in her lyrics Ruby9100M asks – *all the pain in this real world, tell me what it's for... I'm screaming, I'm screaming I bottle all the sorrows up to myself.*

And Stelarc – reflecting on the pain you experienced during the suspensions you write - “a painful experience does collapse the convenient distinction between the mind and body. When overwhelmed with pain you perceive and experience yourself as a physical body, rather than a self that thinks and objectively evaluates in some kind of disconnected and objectified way.”

I'm curious about the ideals envisioned in post-human, even Transhuman imaginaries where the mind – or possibly the spirit – transcends or is “liberated” from the fragilities and “corruptions” of the body, the flesh and materiality. But do you think there might be some kintsugi wabi-sabi *meaning* in the experience of pain that makes us human? I always think great art comes from great suffering and great joy. What are your thoughts about this?

DISCUSSION

Finally, I'd like to bring all our work together by proposing a crazy idea that I've had. So, I've had this idea of creating a Stelarc DAO – a Decentralised Autonomous Organisation – a distributed collective using the power of blockchain technology and governance tokens to collectively fund, devise and decide on Stelarc's next performance embodiment – where it is located, what it will do, whether it produces a Stelarc avatar – with NFTs that can be created and purchased – what do you think?

DISCUSSION

Break to audience Q&A 10-15 mins

Maie is a transcendental being finding her place and voice in our world. Exploring her surroundings and embracing her human form, Maie has embarked on a journey to weave together her experiences and define who she really is. The song is released through Avastar, a new music label dedicated to avatars and transforming music in the metaverse. "I'm still learning how to be here, how to be human and how to create. I don't think I'm very different to the other singers in the world but I know I'm not the same. But, that's a good thing. I've spent most of my time on Earth trying to fit in but I realise I don't have to. With my music video, I wanted to show people what MY world looks like." — **Maie**

The dress worn by Maie in the video was originally designed by JACK IRVING, the multidisciplinary artist and designer from the UK who has built his reputation around lavish pieces of wearable art worn and endorsed by Lady Gaga and many others. It is also being offered as an NFT at BNV.ME and will have future wearability options in the fashion metaverse for owners.