WORLD, BODY, TIME AND SPACE

presentation by Maria N. Stukoff

Vanishing Presence Appropriating the
virtual body

I must admit that I am very surprised to see you all here at
this conference, present and in person. To be specific:
Carrying your burdensome flesh all the way to this conference
to be seen, heard and entertained. But it seems a little odd, if
not perverse to attend this conference that is to evaluate and
display a reality of Cyberspace and its surrounding applica-
tions, such as the Internet. Why are we not at home enjoying
our own cooking and instead, connecting our brains into the
computer matrix as it has been suggested at previous confe-
rences. The truth of the matter is, that we are all still very
much at home in our bodies, we like to show it off and collect
a variety of feel good stimulation. The art of teleconferencing
between international ports and exhibiting art work in virtual
galleries still does not provide us with the same sense of
experience as some may like to speculate upon.

Far too often it has been suggested that a physical body (I pre-
sume the Human Body is signified here) has no significance in
this computer matrix only the mental body can travel along
the wires. The body of flesh left outside while our "other-
self" can travel the inner wonders of the computer space.
Increasingly the old metaphor of the 'split body' exercise and
announcements of transmuting and neo-evolutionary human
beings are ambivalently adopted to describe a revolutionary
evolution of Humans. A future of post human ethics and the
neo human technocrats. And let me query at this point the
assumption that we as Humans foster some infinity with tech-
nological appliances which propels the human evolutionary
journey into the virtual domain?!

More often than not, the particular differences between real
and imagined realities are fast becoming fantastic prophesies
unsurpassed at this point by last years interactivity frenzy.

What I am trying to take hold off is that: In order to represent
the human body as a different substance, like a more techno-
logically suited form which has been undoubtedly expressed
by many philosophical minds, then all aspects of an experien-
ce (such as the presence of a human body, the thought pro-
cess, senses such as feeling & hearing as well as the compu-
ter hardware and constructed image) must all be present
together to create an otherness, otherwise the differences
between them can not be demonstrated.

How will you be able to re - invent yourself if you deny the
self on which you are re-modelling yourself? You can not deny
our instrumental need for physical motion to suddenly evoke
only your inner liquids as the pure survivor of neo-human
reconstruction

That human beings have a physical body, and a mental body
which are independent of one another is something that I, as
a performance artist find difficult to replica. Because funda-
mental to my work is my body and this is the underlying reas-
on for my discussion. Without my body, my physical presence,
I would not be able to perform my work and experiment with
placing myself into a technologically created space. A space in
which to experiment with movement and a projection of the
body with technology

What is important: is my presence. My personal ability to
experience and learn a space but still utilising technology in
redefining my environments I realise that this may sound too

personal for some but it is fundamental to my discussion. The
debate, that the actual presence of the flesh of body (as in me
talking to you in real time) is instrumental in exploring how
we compose space and choose to move within it Especially
within a non-space. The research on the relationships and
parameters between human movement and technological
environments is simply a result from my own research wor-
king with a technological created environment.

As an artist working with my body I am naturally interested in
the development of the body and its future. Allow me these
few questions: What is actually meant when stating the
BODY? When speaking about this body am I referring to the
organic nature of my being (biologically speaking) or the identi-
ty, the exterior shield of my body which projects my being into
the world? Do I have a body or am I body? What is the role
and importance of the human body in relation to our develo-
ping techno-enhanced living environments? Are we now
techo-sapiens rather than homo-sapiens? Have we developed
into a new sensory human organism or merged into a techno-
logical icon, which no longer can be viewed under biological
determinism and morality? It may be so.

If that is a true interpretation of events unfolding: the
question of what kind of being might thrive in a world, in
which nature, is becoming increasingly technocratic will need
to be really understood as suggested by Paul Rabinow. The
whole rhetoric surrounding the human/technological interface
which has some of its roots implanted in cyborgian culture
should be opened to new examinations and determined what
it is that we are actually saying Is this something we want to
become? The answer will depend on how you view the inter-
action between human and technology.

The Human is no longer visible by endless extensions and
invasions of technological hardware. Why is there such an
appetite to merge our bodies with technological gadgetry?
Why do we need to motorise a vehicle, like a body in motion,
that is naturally always in motion? The human spirit beco-
mes submerged inside a hollow structure, reduced to a simple
object, a tool. But on the other hand through the liberation of
technological fairy floss human nature is elevated into a radical
super - dooper - powered - shifting mirage in virtual space. To
burst this bubble: The human mind is not like a god or a
network of wires as a computer. The human mind is most like
a chimpanzee to quote Edward Franklin

A humanly copied body in a virtual world is nothing more than
a flat image. The urge in creating another self has been well
examined and reversed in Psychiatric circles. Unfortunately
such professionals do not seem to join us frequently at these
art conferences to share in discussion their understanding and
concerns about the pursuits of virtual selves and the killing of
the living self. This phenomena in the killing of the self, has
also been the central plot in many Hollywood new age Sci fi
films such as Virtuosity and Ghost in the Machine. The
Hollywood way to taste the matrix is to kill the self, the
humanly body. "a serial killer in the Net...." But because of real
time constraint of time for this panel I need to take this up
another time.

Many artists and colleagues in this field, such as Simon
Penny, have extensively written about representations of a
virtual self and attitudes of the body in relation to virtual
spaces. He talks about the customersation of the body, as a
car, "where the external appearance can be adjusted to suit
the taste of the owner." And goes on to pose questions
about the cultural implications of inhabiting a virtual body. The
importance of this critique is that Penny talks about the exteri-
or, the skin, the outer architecture as the decisive instrument
in the development of the body in a virtual space. The bodily
human image re-newed and remodelled to be re-presented as

image in a virtual arena. The Marquis de Sade who would arguably support this in stating that. our humanly virtue is not taken, but only a mask in making the prostitution, seem more virtual than the actual surrender of the body.

But here the significance of inner and outer seem conflicting. Contrary to the alienation of the body apostles where the inside, the fluidity of humanity will shape your otherself, Penny talks about the exterior The outer surface reflected as the image. He never questions or eliminates the humanly involvement in creating a fantasy self. Interpreting what exists outside ourselves is difficult enough. It involves a going beyond what is apparent to us, creating a meaningful context within which to place our imagination. Which ever way you bet your money one thing is however clear: Interpretations are never true or false.

The confusion surrounding an understanding of outer and inner paradigms has been thoroughly portrayed in Franz Kafka's novel "The Castle." The central figure in the book K is placed or submerged into a labyrinth, an environment with endless rooms, opening and closing doors, corridors, buildings, spaces that allow no escape than to be within them or held outside, not to be let in! An architectural framework not unlike the Internet suggesting a space of emptiness of no height, no depth, no oxygen. A non space. There is an extended experience of emptiness portrayed in "The Castle" and I believe that many virtual characters could complain of this symptom. They all suffer from emptiness, with no body of flesh, no soul or thought to their own. Their environment is too much of a constructed mechanical counterfeit of the real human experience.

K. himself never is able to see beyond himself and see the entire complexity of his situation. Like in the Moo or other forming typist groups and the Net: You log on, you are there on the screen talking, living, creating, but not present, not breathing. What is the colour of oxygen in Cyberspace? Cyberspace to a degree is like a black hole in space, attempting to absorb all. A conspiracy perhaps preceeded only by the clever intenetions by the Pied Piper from Hameln lurking the childen into his domain by suductive music. Yes ok, the web may not be created for physical insertions but do not be fooled: rather this non space is created to suck up the creative energies of our minds to do with it what it wants to later, once you have turned off the power. The blood flow sucked from us to feed the hunger of the machines. Once converted and absorbed.. the question of how are you?, will be surpassed by asking: Can you feel yourself today? .. No I don't. Sorry I forgot to turn on the power supply.

Finally, to finish my assault and move on with my scepticism: I wonder if we as artists and theorists etc.. still claim to be re-designing or re-focusing the intention of the usage of Military gadgetry which is primarily designed to destroy bodies in war activities? It seems that more and more we are almost too eager to give our body freely to the Big Daddy Machine to be wired up and controlled by future networks. At this point I would like to propose that instead of focusing on the technological advances which will benefit/effect the human evolutionary process, why not reverse the experience and focus on what effects humans have on the development of technological hardware?

Unless we are more critical and pay more attention to what is actually being suggested and focus on the development of the self and the de-formation of the self, in relation to technological advancements, we will only have succeeded in performing thoughtless, academic papers to foster our own independent ego, in which no moment of critique is even possible.

So if we are to live in a space of new ... what will be the

colour of oxygen?

Maria N. Stukoff

Footnotes:

1 Grassmuck, Volker. Helsinki, paper given at ISEA 1994

2 What is a Human Being, Olafson, Frederik A , Cambridge University Press1995

3 An adaptation of a quote by The Marque de Sade, Dr Iwan Bloch. Castle Books NY, p 109

4 Art & Cyberculture Media Information Australia, Aug 1993, Penny, Simon Virtual Body Building

5 An adaptation of a quote by· The Marque de Sade, Dr Iwan Bloch, Castle Books NY, p 91