

# Case Study Proposal Performance Artist Stelarc Focus 1 - Arts

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June 2002

#### **Background:**

Stelarc is a controversial performance artist with an extensive body of work that spans a period of over twenty years. This work involves body piercing and other forms of body penetration, aerial suspension, electronic prosthesis, amplification of sounds and images of natural internal and external body functions, use of haptic and sensory devices in immersive environments, as well as artificial extension of the nervous system through the network of the World Wide Web. Stelarc has worked internationally with scientists, technicians, computer programmers and software and hardware designers and engineers to produce one of the most fascinating and bizarre forms of performance art to date. His work extends a tradition that has its roots in the avant garde. It is a combination of dance, theatre, visual and media art, as well as technological design implemented through the medium of performance. Its main thematic is the body and what he considers its inability to respond properly to the environments created by new technology. Stelarc believes that the body needs the support of such technologies and proposes the creation of a cyborgian type of organism that can survive the challenges of the twenty-first century. His performance work also challenges all our current models for identifying, gathering, and authenticating performance records, especially those of an interactive, experiential and dynamic nature.

This case study is an attempt to identify what new kinds of records this work generates as this artist maps and charts the internal and external geography of the human body. Stelarc's performance is a dynamic modeling and remodeling of the body's behavior. He captures, uploads, modifies and otherwise manipulates this data within a variety of digital systems and networks. The records created in the course of these actions challenge current methods in archival science as well as create a range of potential legal, ethical and philosophical problems. Stelarc's work reflects the currently popular dialectic of the post-human, a natural consequence of cybernetics' agenda of 'control and communication in complex electronic machines like computers and the human nervous system' (Wiener. 1948, 14-17). The chief problem for the archivist is to identify what records are created. It is known for example that records can be found distributed across a range of networks and systems, some of them beyond the control of the artist. These are also subject to modification from a number of distant locations, ordinarily with the consent of the artist. Since the body, as well as other performance objects and systems play equally prominent roles in this type of performance event, we can say that different levels or

stages of a single record exist. The task therefore becomes one of excavating these sites in an effort to locate the precise contexts in which these records can be evaluated and to authenticate them.

#### **Description of Case Study:**

We recommend an interview be conducted with the artist at a convenient time to assess the nature of the problem and the scope of the study to be carried out. We also propose an analysis of the text of this interview in relation to the twenty-two (plus) questions case study leaders have been assigned. In the projected second stage of the study, we propose the construction/creation of a model or prototype of an experiential, interactive and dynamic system or environment to examine one or more levels of Stelarc's composite system of record generation. This model can take the form of a performance installation, perhaps set up within an interactive access-grid network linking two or more remote sites. We suggest Monash in Australia, because Stelarc ordinarily lives there, and because InterPARES 2 has research connections with that University. We believe that, within this proposed environment, performance records can be studied from their moment of origin to the moment of final performance. More importantly, the availability of such a model will make it possible to examine/test some of the very artifacts/records Stelarc has created in the course of his career, some of which cannot be restaged because of outdated or obsolete technological systems. We feel that a theoretical understanding of the records created can be obtained and, according to the mandate of InterPARES 2, ensure whether these systems and the records they create can be trusted as to content i.e. reliability and accuracy.

#### **Rationale:**

In the creation and maintenance of artistic records of any form, and especially in those that utilize interactive, dynamic and experiential environments, it is important for the researcher to know whether,

- 1. The artist values his or her work enough to want to preserve it
- 2. The artist has some formal or informal system in place for such preservation and
- 3. That these records are accessible and available for study

If these three initial conditions are not met, we foresee a difficulty in pursuing the case study from the interview stage to the prototyping or modeling stage. Because of the extraordinary nature of this artist's work, we need to have formal consent to model his processes in the same unique manner as in the original. The dynamic, interactive and experiential records that Stelarc creates may have no other form of verification than through such a prototypical testing. There is great value in doing such work because of the potential outcomes for InterPARES 2. One of the main problems archivists are faced with in working with records in electronic environments is that these hardware and software systems become easily outdated as newer technologies come on the market. We understand that the identification and use of an international standard for electronic systems may not be in the best interest of free market enterprise, but this research may be able to identify some basic standards to ensure consistency across certain areas. We believe that this is achievable with the help of artists who use these technologies, often for purposes beyond their intentional design. We also feel that many of the research questions unique to all of the Domain and Cross Domain teams could be answered if it were possible to set up,

- 1. A specially designed environment
- 2. A situation for dynamically monitoring the performance of its human and computing systems, and
- 3. An opportunity to carry out periodic analyses of these activities in order to determine the exact nature of the record and its stability under performance conditions.

## **Methodologies:**

We propose that a variety of different methodologies be used to examine the interview transcript, i.e., textual, diplomatic and discourse analyses. To properly assess the nature of these artistic records, we also feel that it is crucial to implement performance itself as a methodological approach. The justification for this is grounded in the fact that artists themselves see performance as the dynamic activation of a series of processes that produce unstable results when conducted in electronic environments, meaning that it is not always consistent or repeatable over time. Hence, to say that a record is accurate or authentic, one would have to repeat a set of predetermined processes with some very specific tools in an environment that is formally fixed. For this reason, we believe that modeling and prototyping a performance situation can be an extremely useful strategy. We therefore propose the following two stages.

Stage 1:

- Conduct a preliminary interview with the artist Stelarc to determine the scope of his work and suggest suitable methods of approach.
- Copy interview tape and send to other interested researchers for analysis.
- Conduct a methodical analysis of the interview text (sound tape and written document), matching the sets of questions devised after our interview with the range of research questions from domain and cross-domain teams and foci.
- Interview previous 'performance assistants' or 'subjects' who have tested or been subjected to Stelarc's processes. This would give us an idea of potential problems with the proposed model or prototype.

Stage 2:

- Devise model and present to the InterPARES research teams at a convenient opportunity
- Invite Stelarc to demonstrate and verify the system and possibly create a postperformance questionnaire/interview with him.

Failing the opportunity to present Stage 2 of the process, we propose the continuation of the work in a different context, i.e., with another artist or set of records that can be tested and verified with the limits of our resources as well as designed according to the outcomes of Stage 1.

## **Case Study Team:**

Henry Daniel will oversee the project with Luciana Duranti and a research assistant at UBC. Specialists from other disciplines are invited to participate.

### Timeline:

- May 2002: Preliminary Interview with Stelarc in Vancouver (with Luciana Duranti).
- September 2002: Investigate human subject's approval, transcribe interview, submit proposal to International Team (with Luciana Duranti, Tahra Fung, and research assistant).
- February 2003: Report on the progress of the Case Study to the InterPARES 2 Workshop in Vancouver. Suggest plan for future work.