



Art at the dawn of the post-human era

Julian McKinnon talks to three artists working on the technological frontier – Stelarc, Elena Knox and Simon Ingram – who are helping define the complex relations between human and non human, virtual and real.

The world was in a calamitous state when Walter Benjamin penned *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in Paris, 1936. The socio-political repercussions of industrialisation and the emergence of mass media were all pervasive. The ravages of the First World War were barely subsiding, and the Second was about to begin. The excitement of new possibility born of revolution had morphed into extreme totalitarianism in Russia. A new era was taking shape, its technologies giving rise to previously unseen social and political orders. With remarkable insight, Benjamin's essay explored the implications of all this for art, both in its role and in its methods of production.

Seeing an emergent paradigm in which industrial processes shaped art and vice versa, Benjamin claimed: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art." He saw art's 'aura' or sense of sacredness being diminished by the development of photography, film and printing processes that replicated images. This related to broader cultural trends than the rarefied realm of art itself. Benjamin, an avowed Marxist, couldn't have foreseen an era

of capital in which market forces would elevate the 'aura' of certain artworks into the fiscal stratosphere. Art, just like social culture, is forever in flux.

Today this 'aura' continues to diminish with the explosion of technological platforms, such as Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube, which largely define how contemporary images are viewed. There's an undeniable democratisation of image-making taking place, and anybody with a smartphone can participate in global visual culture. Beneath the layers of cat pics, food portraits, and selfies, through the endless marketing content, and past the incessant replication of memes, there exists a developing artistic culture in an inescapable relationship with technology.

Eighty years after Benjamin's treatise on art and machines, increasing technological expansion has created further social and political ruptures. A new wave of robotic automation looks set to permanently alter the globalised economy – in itself already unrecognisable from the situation of the 1930s. Autonomous vehicles and artificial intelligence point to an imminent situation of decreased human labour. Whether this future will resemble some



Above: Stelarc, *Third Hand*, Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya. ©Stelarc. Photo: Simon Hunter

Opposite page: Elena Knox, *Comfortable and Alive* (video still), 2014, 6-channel video, 3:22. Courtesy of the artist



Elena Knox, *Occupation* (video still), 2014, single-channel video, 4:57. Courtesy of the artist

Orwellian nightmare, a technology driven utopia, or something in between is unknown. Though it's clear that human society is changing.

Stelarc, born Stelios Arcadiou, is an Australian-Cypriot performance artist who has explored the interrelationship of technology and the body since the late 1960s. His work has included physical suspensions – with hooks inserted into his skin, bodily extension – utilising muscle activated robotic prosthetics, and anatomical alterations. He has surgically constructed an extra ear on his forearm, that will be internet enabled. Other works have connected his body to interactive interfaces, filmed his internal anatomy, and also inserted sculpture into his stomach. “Technology is the contemporary media that generates new information and unexpected images. That’s why it’s interesting,” he says.

Stelarc visited New Zealand in April 2016 to participate in the exhibition *Alter* at Auckland’s Gus Fisher Gallery. He exhibited his *Prosthetic Head* installation: an embodied conversational agent that responds to a person speaking to it. Curated by Deborah Lawler-Dormer, *Alter* was a group exhibition that examined the complex relationship between humans and technology, the real and the synthetic. Stelarc was an obvious inclusion. “I grew up in the 1960s, so Marshall McLuhan was someone I read. He had a great definition of technology. Technology is the external organs of the body. We’ve evolved as a biological entity with soft internal organs, but now to operate in a technological terrain we have to engineer additional external organs. And that’s really what our technologies are – extra eyes, extra hands, accelerated means of locomotion, micro and macro sliding of our optical vision and extended computational and cognitive systems. We take all this for granted. But if you were simply a biological body, you wouldn’t be able to operate very effectively in the world as it is,” he says.

On the experience of having his musculature wired up to networks and prosthetics, Stelarc muses: “You have experiences where the technology becomes part of your nervous system – in the same way that if you’re driving a car or operating a machine you have an experience of symbiosis with the system, the technology becomes your phantom limb. The body is vulnerable, inadequate and is in fact profoundly obsolete – especially in the technological terrain of fast, powerful and precise machinery. The biological anatomy that we have limits us in terms of our perception and agency in the world. Technology to a great degree extends the body’s operation beyond the boundaries of our skin and beyond the local space we inhabit. Ever since hominids became bipedal, and two limbs became manipulators, we began constructing artifacts, instruments and machines. One could argue that what it means to be human has always been determined and defined by the trajectory of technology.”

Stelarc’s thoughts on the role of the artist in the shaping of culture articulate his alternative outlook. “We’re conditioned by our culture and we’re constrained in our philosophy, by our language. There are all sorts of controls that go on all the time. We need to get away from obsession with control. In a complex interactive system of things, no one is in control and the simplistic master-slave relationship with technology is not reflective of what happens. The world is a multifaceted and messy space of interaction. There are a lot of things you don’t have any control over. Certainly there is contingency, there is choice, but that is only part of a complex system of diverse causal events. As artists I think we’re in the business of generating contestable futures – possibilities that can be experienced, examined, sometimes appropriated, and most often discarded.”

Also visiting New Zealand to participate in *Alter* was

Elena Knox, an artist, musician, academic, writer, and performer from Sydney. She teaches at University of New South Wales School of Art & Design. Knox has a background in vaudeville and screen acting, so performance art was a natural extension. Her performances are theatrical, musical, comical and engage in critical discourses. “I used to be part of a stand-up comedy girl-gang in Sydney. But my stuff was always on the dark edge, you know – is this funny or isn’t it? I enjoyed that. It goes over in some crowds really well, and others not so much. I like that uncomfortable edge; it’s a productive area. But it’s also just what I gravitate to anyway, so the decision to work with it is an obvious one,” she says.

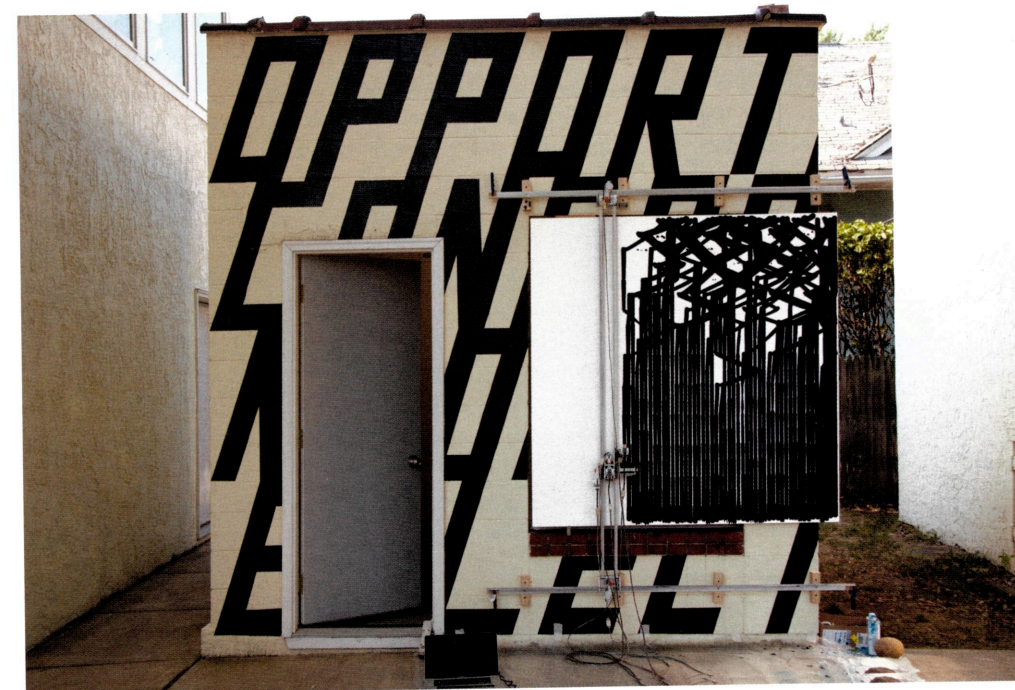
Knox’s recent series of work utilising a Geminoid-F android from Osaka University’s ATR Hiroshi Ishiguro Laboratory is what saw her engage with *Alter*. The Geminoid-F is a ‘female’ android and has been designed to exhibit a wide range of natural expressions, including smiling and frowning. Knox made a series of video artworks, featuring the robot, that were exhibited at UNSW Galleries in 2015 and Hong Kong’s Run Run Shaw Centre for Creative Media in 2016. Titled *Actroid Series I*, the series addresses cultural tropes of feminine identity in and through robotics.

Comfortable and Alive, a six-channel video work that featured in *Alter*, shows a composited pair of Geminoid-F faces against a floral backdrop. The faces are arranged like the yin-yang; one is upside down. “Hello, please be comfortable,” one robot chimes, before commencing a ‘hypnotic induction’ peptalk. Several minutes in, the title line surfaces. “Hypnosis is a positive word. It makes you relax, and feel comfortable and alive,” says one of the robot heads. “Comfortable and alive,” echoes the other.

The simulated blinking and movements of the android faces are eerie, their near-human synthetic expressions disquieting. Challenging assumptions that are made for the sake of comfort in the status quo is at the core of Knox’s work with these machines. “Gender stereotype is not just imposed by heteronormativity, we’re also complicit in it. We’re enmeshed. So some of the discomfort is taking responsibility for our own involvement,” she says.

Discussing potentially problematic aspects of the development of robotics, Knox says: “Robots have no inherent sex, so the assignments of gender identity are purely plastic. I worked with these robots and they’re alluring. They’re designed to be. I’ve talked to engineers who are developing these technologies, and gender is one thing where they think that they have it locked down. There are so many variables involved with every aspect of robotics and AI, I think it’s easy for them to just gravitate to stereotype when it comes to gender. I want to have a discussion and say ‘no wait, that’s not an assumption that should be made’. These femininity tropes, which are designed to make people feel comfortable, are very tied in to ideas of service. They’re getting replicated and, perhaps downstream, mass-produced. Hollywood loves the idea of sex-bots, though as technology develops, there are some implications for real people that we don’t want to discuss. What happens to sex workers, say, when you get sex-bots that look like them, but that have no pain threshold?”

A quietly whirring robotic machine presses a brush into a tray of paint. The brush lifts and nudges into a canvas surface. The machine moves, leaving a trail of paint on the canvas. Slowly, systematically it adds more paint.



Left: Simon Ingram, *En Plein Air*, 2011, machine still (16/07/2011 5:05pm), The Suburban, Chicago. Painting machine (oil, Plexiglas, aluminium, cable, Lego, brush, computer, software), and primed canvas, collection of Michelle Grabner. Photo: Simon Ingram