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The Problematic of Embodiment in Online Specta(c)torship

Abstract

Digital media, and especially the widespread use of the internet, challenge our experience of embodied presence and consequently force us to rethink the definition of the 'human' body that informs our social practices. Starting from the online documentations of Guy Ben-Ary's bio-artwork cellF (2015), Alvin Lucier's seminal experimental music piece Music for Solo Performer (1965), and Stelarc's performance RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED (2015) the present article participates in this debate by asking: what type of embodied identity is contoured in online specta(c)torship?

From a methodological point of view, the article resonates with Mieke Bal's insistence on the importance of the case study in art theory and in the philosophy of art. It aims at performing a philosophical intervention with respect to the contemporary understanding of embodiment starting from the experience proposed by the encounter with specific artworks.

Drawing on the case studies mentioned above and on theories of embodiment formulated in a diversity of contexts — such as affect theory (Seigworth and Greg, Clough), feminist critique (Grosz, Butler), performance studies (Salazar Sutil) and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze —, the article contends that the problematic of the embodied subject, such as it appears in online specta(c)torship, is that of an ongoing misrecognition: an ongoing decentring

of the thinking subject (of the cartesian cogito) in a continuous renegotiation of the bio-techno-logical 'self' that grounds the 'I' and is in turn grounded by it.

Key words: *online spectatorship, embodiment, philosophy of media, contemporary art, new media art, art theory, philosophy of art.*

I. Introduction

This article aims at participating in a paradigm shift in art theory methodology, a shift that values the engagement with specific artworks to the expense of building overarching categories and theoretical frameworks (Bal 2020, 16-17). The intention here is to address the philosophical problematic of embodiment in online specta(c)torship¹ not by surveilling theoretical writings and artistic practices that deal with this subject, but rather by engaging with specific case studies, with specific instances in which the common sense understanding of embodiment is disturbed. We aim at navigating the problematic of embodied subjectivity in online specta(c)torship from within, rather than assuming a position that pretends to objectively map this problematic from its outside. The methodological conviction is that one has to start a theoretical enquiry by being immersed 'in the middle' of the problematic, *in medias res* as it were: there is never a stable outside that would allow an objective description of a problematic and of its conditions. In the case of this article, this 'middle' that constitutes the (lack of) origin is provided, somewhat paradoxically, by an encounter with *cellF*, a 2015 bio-art work by Guy Ben-Ary that insists on being analogue: '[t]here is no programming or computers involved, only biological matter and analogue circuits; a "wet-analogue" instrument' (Moore et al. 2016, 31).

cellF was developed by Guy Ben-Ary in collaboration with designer and new media artist Nathan Thompson, electrical engineer and synthesizer builder Dr. Andrew Fitch, musician Dr. Darren Moore, stem cell scientist Dr. Michael Edel, neuro-scientist Dr. Stuart Hodgetts, and neuro-engineer Dr. Douglas Bakkum (Ben-Ary n.d.). It is described as a neural synthesizer, comprising a 'brain' made of biological neural networks that grow in a Petri dish (the neurons are bio-engineered from Ben-Ary's stem cells), and a 'body,' a custom-built synthesizer. 'Human' musicians are invited to interact with *cellF*, the music they produce is fed into the neural networks as electrical stimulation for the neurons, and the neural networks in their turn control the analogue synthesizers generating a musical output to which the 'human' musicians will respond. *cellF* premiered in Perth in 2015 (Ben-Ary n.d.).

¹ The parenthetical (c), inspired by Augusto Boal's term 'spect-actor' (Boal [1974] 2008), points towards a problematic interplay of activity and passivity involved in the process of specta(c)torship (Băcăran 2022).

From the beginning, a stringent question arises concerning the intricate embodiment of *cellF* (self?). In a close analysis of the work, Kirsten Hudson argues that *cellF* problematizes current paradigms of understanding (and constructing) embodied identity based on data collection and manipulation by highlighting the noisy aspect of life (Hudson 2015). This paper will be adding that, closely related to the aspects that Hudson discusses, *cellF* instantiates a crisis of identity that decenters the embodied spectator, and, one step further, allows us to formulate in a new light the problematic of embodiment in online specta(c)torship.

In a recent paper published in the *In Medias Res* journal, Amela Delić asks how emotions and thinking function in the context of digital media ‘intermediation’, and interrogates the new dynamics of identity made possible by the internet and social media (Delić 2022). The present article offers a new perspective that traverses the same problematic space, albeit in a very different direction. If Delić asks “Where does one’s soul live when transferred to one’s virtual self?”, and understands technology in terms of liberation/captivation of the ‘human’, this paper claims that what is at stake in digital technology is foremost a renegotiation of embodied identity, interrogating the meaning and being of the ‘one’, the ‘self’, the ‘human’, and the role of technology in their (de)construction. While the two approaches remain radically different, nonetheless they share the same basic ethical imperative: the necessity of critically interrogating digital media and their consequences with respect to the embodied experience that they afford.

II. Self / cellF

The question that we take as our starting point is then: what kind of body does *cellF* instantiate? The inaudible difference of the title from itself is already pointing us in two divergent directions: a self and a network of cells. How do these two extremes (the supposed identity of the self; and the supposed multiplicity of the cells that ground it) fold into each other? How to understand the paradoxical concurrent existence of the multiple and the identical and their emergence through one another?

Let us first unpack the premisses of this question before proceeding in the attempt of answering it.

The embodied self is far from being the form of an absolute identity, on the contrary, it is subtended by a multiplicity of affects and flows of desire. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Greg’s understanding of bodies formulated in the context of affect theory is relevant in this sense:

Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body’s perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter. With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in its relations— until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter. (Seigworth and Greg 2010, 3)

In other words, from this perspective, a body is continuously formed as an affective relational network. This affords the possibility of thinking the body beyond the figure of the body-as-organism, that is, beyond the figure of an auto-poietic unity, towards what Patricia Clough terms the 'biomediated body' (Clough 2010). The figure of the 'biomediated body' emphasizes the material and affective flows that ground the body, and insists on matter's capacity to self-organize, to be informational, in order to support this image of the body as an emergent dynamic multiplicity never fully consistent with itself. Clough formulates a complex critical position that frames the 'biomediated body' as a historically specific organization of material forces, a body that is shaped by socio-politico-economic relations of power and their affective substrates (Clough 2010).

Nonetheless, despite the complex intermesh of affective flows that subtend the being of the embodied subject, the possibility of saying 'I' relies on the coagulation of a form of identity upon this ground of multiplicity (be it fragile and fluid, be it illusory), that is, it relies on the coagulation of the double (erroneous) figure of the psychological subject and of the organism (and at the very same time on the emergence of the incommensurable distance between them). Lisa Blackman, critically engaging with affect theory, cogently argues that the non-subjective nature of affect requires a theory of subjectivity, in other words, that 'our theorizations of affect require attending to the models of subjectivity that we implicitly and sometimes explicitly invoke in our reinventions of the human, the body, politics and life' (Blackman 2012). Blackman formulates the question of embodied subjectivity – drawing on affect theory but remaining critical of its assumptions – as being: 'how we live singularity in the face of multiplicity?' (Blackman 2012, 2, 16). It is this question that tends to surface in the experience that *cellF* proposes. How come an embodied subject can emerge at all upon the dynamic intermesh of affects?

Importantly, just as much as the self is not a figure of pure identity but the field of a paradoxical interplay of singularity and multiplicity, the interconnected neural cells in a petri dish, likewise, are not a figure of pure multiplicity: a form of identity is inherent in the existence of the individual cell. Yet, with respect to the 'I' and to the organism, the network of cells does raise the problem of the multiple that grounds identity: it opens the 'I' (beyond itself) towards the complex material multiplicity that subtends it.

It is not in absolute terms, but with respect to one another, through the uncanny interplay that opens up between them, that the self and the network of neural cells (the two directions that the title 'cellF' points towards) introduce the problematic of identity and multiplicity.

So, again: how do these two extremes (the supposed identity of the self; and the supposed multiplicity of the cells that ground it) fold into each other? How to understand the paradoxical concurrent existence of the multiple and the identical and their emergence through one another?

In the case of *cellF* these questions become immediately manifest in two ways:

(1) Firstly, the problem lies in the relation of the work with the body of the artist. Would it be possible to understand *cellF* (a network of neurons grown from Ben-Ary's cells, with the same genetic code) as an extension of the artist's body? A self that grows outside itself? After all, in a way, *cellF* is a kind of 'cybernetic self-portrait', or at least the result of 'of a four-year collaboration led by artist Guy Ben-Ary to create a cybernetic self portrait' (Moore et al. 2016, 31). A self-portrait in the form of a 'cybernetic musician, a rock star in a Petri dish' (Moore et al. 2016, 31), a self portrait that acts, that has life; a parallel self that mirrors, complements and destabilizes the self that it 'portrays'. An embodied self, the artist's body, that is extended, mirrored, destabilized in such a way that it acts outside the limits set up by the skin, and outside of the limits of conscious agency, a sort of expulsion of the self into the outside. What does that do to the self?

Similarly, could it be said that *cellF* is an extension of the musician's body (as it is involved in producing the musical output)? More generally, what is the relation between the body and its extensions, between the body and its prostheses? What does it mean when these prostheses are themselves alive? And what does it mean when the prostheses share one's genetic code? We will leave these questions open for now.

(2) Secondly, if one accepts that consciousness could be a function of neural interactions, then: could a constructed neural network, given that it would be complex enough, develop something like consciousness by itself? *cellF* is deeply involved in this debate: '[t]he project aimed to move beyond pure data translation or sonification of neuronal activity toward the development of an entity that has the potential to exhibit emergent behaviour or very basic musical characteristics' (Moore et al. 2016, 32). Successful or not in its ambitions, is this work pointing towards a more or less distant future when something like a 'self' could emerge from constructed neural networks? Again, the question will have to remain open.

Both these facets of the problem might be absurd (that is, according to one possible etymology of the word 'absurd': 'out of tune,' 'discordant'²) with respect to a humanist paradigm that presupposes as always already known the being and becoming of the bodies that think, of the bodies that we ourselves are (or have?) in as much as we think. But, they are pertinent exactly because of their absurdity (dis-harmony). They point towards a certain crisis in our understanding of the embodied self, a crisis that comes to the fore in the experience that this work proposes (through the open questions that one cannot answer, yet that one cannot leave unanswered). These questions do not make any sense for as long as we have a clear and distinct idea of what identity is, of what it means to say 'I... but do we, really?

2 See for example the etymology accepted by the Oxford English Dictionary: "[...] Latin *absurdus* out-of-tune, discordant, awkward, uncouth, uncivilized, preposterous, ridiculous, inappropriate" (Entry for 'absurd' in Oxford English Dictionary, Accessed 23.11.2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/792?redirectedFrom=absurd#eid>).

III. mycellF?

One step further down our absurd, dissonant path: my⁽²⁾ encounter with *cellF* (and we already have to ask ‘what could personal pronouns mean?’, ‘what could names or titles mean?’, when the principle of identity is under question) happens only through the online documentation. There are aspects of the live experience of a work that is alive, which remain completely out of reach for the online spectator, and importantly so.

There are, in fact, several distinct instances of specta(c)torship with respect to this work that should be distinguished: there are the spectators immersed in the experience of the live concert, and there are the spectators that, as myself, access the online documentation. But then, the ‘human’ musician is a spectator too with respect to the output generated by the neurons-synthesizer system, and in its turn, the network of neurons is a spectator with respect to the impulses that it receives from the ‘human’ musicians and that it reacts to. And we cannot miss that there is a kind of mirroring at play between all these passive-active bodies that occupy in different ways the position of the spectator. A mirroring that could tell us something about the being and becoming of these bodies. I am especially interested in the parallel between: *cellF*, the network of neurons in a petri dish that receives impulses outside of its immediate reach through a technological network that comes to be referred to as its body; and the online spectator (mycellF), a network of neurons that receives impulses outside of its immediate reach through a technological network that... is or is it not its body?...

The problematic of online specta(c)torship, with respect to *cellF*, and more broadly, is thus that of the relationship between the self as lived experience of the world and the bio-techno-logical network. And there is, of course, a whole world in that gap between *cellF* and self, between electrical signals traveling in neural networks in a stack of Petri dishes and a conscious spectator. And yet, there is a certain kind of empathy at play, the beginning of a recognition, especially for the online spectator whose condition is more easily identifiable as a neural network (a nervous system) surrounded by electrical grids (the devices used to access the internet) which feed it stimuli and collect, in turn, the impulses that result. The self that perceives is invited to recognize itself, some of the main physiological processes that underlie its very existence, in that which it perceives, in the bio-techno-logical network that is *cellF*. The stability of the contours of the ‘human’ body and the exteriority of the technological network come thus to be problematized. At the very same time, this recognition fails. ‘I’ am not simply a bio-techno-logical network, ‘I’ am not simply a multiplicity, but an identity that is (de)constructed upon the background of a multiplicity that itself grounds.

This double movement of recognition/differentiation is especially prominent when the network in its materiality is the same in the two cases, as it happens in Alvin Lucier’s *Music for Solo Performer* (1965).³

3 A filmed version of the performance can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIPU2ynqy2Y>, accessed 23.11.2021.

Lucier sits on a chair alone on the stage, a device mounted on his head picks up the alpha waves produced by his brain, and transmits electrical signals to several speakers placed near percussion instruments in such a way that the vibrations of the speakers cause the instruments to resonate and produce sound (Lucier 2012, 51-53). ‘Who is the performer?’ — this is the question we are facing here. What is the difference between the brain as a complex network of neurons producing electrical signals that can be further transmitted through a technological network to the musical instruments and the brain as a complex network of neurons that subtends a consciousness? Can we borrow the name ‘Alvin Lucier’ to refer to the solo performer? Self? What is the body of the performer? What are the limits that would define it?

Electrical signals travel through a network between Alvin Lucier’s brain and his eyelids, his fingers; and the eyelids move, the fingers move (voluntarily and involuntarily), responding to those signals. That is Lucier’s body, ‘his body,’ we call it ‘Alvin Lucier’ because it moves seemingly ‘immediately’ — although, by way of the infinitely thick mediation of cells that are alive. Electrical signals travel through a network between Alvin Lucier’s brain and the percussion instruments that move... voluntarily? involuntarily? Just as ‘immediate’ as the movements of the fingers — infinitely mediated. Does this body think? Does it say ‘I’? Is it a body at all? Can it bear the weight of a name (can it bear the weight of a title)? Can it bear the weight of a personal pronoun?

As an online spectator one cannot fail to feel that all these questions are reflected back onto one’s own^(?) existence in front of the computer screen, connected to an immense technological network that... is, or is it not one’s^(?) body?

The double movement of recognition and differentiation between on the one hand organic/inorganic networks that transmit and process electrical signals, and on the other hand (the same?) organic/inorganic networks that subtend consciousness opens up, in this sense, a deconstruction of the limits of one’s body inasmuch as the immediacy of presence goes beyond the contours of the skin. The body image associated with the ‘human’ does not quite hold when faced with the recognition/differentiation proposed by *Music for Solo Performer* and *cellF*.

A perceiving body (the one that grounds the subjectivity of the spectator) is on the point of encountering an image of itself in the outside world (*cellF*), but under a form much different from the one that it hitherto assumed for itself (self). What is on the point of happening is something like a belated mirror stage, or rather a belated mirror proto-stage, to use Bernard Stiegler’s fitting concept (Stiegler 1998, 141) — since this is the question of constructing an embodied subjectivity through its reflection in what comes to be expelled as the outside, the ‘techno-’. A mirroring that destabilizes one’s identity and crystallizes for a brief moment another kind of body (and, consequently, another kind of subjectivity) stripped to the bare stimuli interacting in organic/inorganic systems of relations, a body as a relational interplay of affects in search for its limits, for the definition that would necessarily negate it. A mirror stage that is necessarily missed, inasmuch as it cannot completely overthrow the sovereign subject that one takes oneself to be, it can only

temporarily destabilize it and decentre it. A phantasmal temporary subject that recognizes itself in the figure of *cellF* emerges only to immediately collapse back under the institutionally reinforced contours imposed by the label 'human'. There is a kind of nakedness to this body stripped of its skin (stripped of its assumed 'natural' limits), in search of its contours, to this bare affectivity as a conglomeration of intensities born from the interaction of stimuli in heterogeneous media that is always on the point of canceling itself. It is the kind of body that 'I,' the spectator, start guessing 'I myself (not quite) 'have' (or 'am?') when recognizing it in *cellF*. And it is the body that 'I' lose.

But the traces of this loss⁴ are enough to destabilize, if only infinitesimally, the corporeal identity of the thinking subject that 'I' take myself to be. There is a tension between the socially and politically sanctioned 'human' body (limited by its skin and its horizon), with the feeling of a self seemingly relying upon it, and this extended affective network (an ill defined body, dynamic and fluid, in search of a definition that could only cancel it) that 'I' both recognize myself^(?) in and differentiate myself^(?) from. What comes to be at stake then, is a renegotiation of the body image of the perceiving subject, or, in other words, of one's own^(?) body as given in perception, in light of this double movement of recognition and differentiation that problematizes the limits of the 'human'.

IV. (De)Constructing the Body Image

Elizabeth Grosz, building on the work of psychiatrist Paul Schilder contends that the body image cannot be simply and unequivocally identified with the sensations provided by a purely anatomical body, being rather a function of subject's psychology and socio-historical context. It is fluid and dynamic, its contours are continuously negotiated and not fixed by nature or anatomical boundaries, such as the skin. There is no clear, stable distinction between the inside and the outside of the body:

[...] there is a zone outside the body, occupying its surrounding space, which is incorporated into the body. Intrusion into this bodily space is considered as much a violation as penetration of the body itself. (Grosz 1994, 79)

Likewise, there is no clear distinction between the anatomical body and the objects that surround it:

[...] the body image is capable of accommodating and incorporating an extremely wide range of objects. Anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image—clothing, jewelry, other bodies, objects. (Grosz 1994, 80)

4 Among which the archive of linguistic signs that are muted under the weight of my proper name, under the weight of personal pronouns, under the violence of the signature that inscribes this text in a socio-economic and political context predicated on obsolete humanist definitions.

In this sense, I claim that *cellF* offers the impulses for a radical renegotiation of the body image. One's⁽²⁾ body as a spectator, as glanced at that moment when a mirroring relation with *cellF* is on the point of happening, goes far beyond the borders of the institutionally sanctioned 'human' body. It should be rather thought of as something like an extended bio-techno-logical network traversed by stimuli or intensities, and contoured by the intensities that traverse it. It incorporates, just as it does with any other of its organs, the whole infrastructure that leads the stimuli to the brain and that responds to the impulses generated in return.

The media intertwined with our bodies in our daily lives are appropriated as one's own⁽²⁾ body in the same way that clothing or jewelry are in Grosz's example.⁵ As Marshal McLuhan put it, ours is an extended body with an extended nervous system (McLuhan [1964] 1994). But, what McLuhan failed to see is that there is no stable 'human' body that stands by default at the centre of these networks of extensions, that the embodied subjectivity is decentred and dispersed to the point of merging into the network of its extensions. There is no one to say 'I' at the center by separating themselves from their prostheses, and there never was. The 'I' is screamed as an error, as a misrecognition from the intricate intertwining of extensions that do not extend anything.

What is new is not that the body is extended, but that the body starts to realize that it was never anything else but a network of extensions without a stable centre (extensions that extend nothing) and yet that define (that perform) a ghostly, fragile, erroneous centre, an embodied subjectivity. The extensions iteratively perform the interior that exteriorizes them. We are bio-techno-logical bodies: the 'techno-' (the exterior, the 'cultural', the network of extensions) always already shapes the 'bio-' of the '-logos' which in its turn grounds the 'techno-'.

The anatomical 'human' body, the 'organic' body (bio-), is a negotiation of the body image at a social level and not anterior to it; there is no natural, organic body separated from the body image and its 'cultural' context. As Judith Butler argues with respect to the sexed body, scientific discourse, medical discourse, are always embedded in a 'cultural' context and are dependent on the power relations intrinsic to that context (Butler 1990, 106-111). The appearance of naturalness is itself constituted, and its artificiality can be glimpsed only from 'a self-consciously denaturalized position' (Butler 1990, 110). Yet, as Butler's critical reading of Foucault makes patently clear, such a 'denaturalized position,' a position 'outside' the law (-logos, law of science, law of nature) is utterly impossible, the law maintains the 'outside' within itself (Butler 1990, 106). The critique of the naturalness of the sexed body along with that of the impossibility of a pure 'denaturalized position' leads Butler to question the category of 'the body' as a 'natural' given, as a blank slate upon which *a posteriori* 'cultural' inscriptions will be performed (Butler 1990, 129-129). Instead, Butler argues, 'the body' is produced as a variable boundary between the culturally negotiated 'inside' and 'outside,' not an *a priori* given but the trace of a performance (of the performance of gender for Butler) (Butler 1990, 128-141).

5 Or, more exactly, it is not that technological media are appropriated, it is just their exclusion from the body is being problematized. Since the embodied thinking subject is always already technological. On technology inherent to the 'human' see (Stiegler 1998).

What is proximally given (yet infinitely mediated) is this relative body image, this negotiation of 'inside' and 'outside' and of the limits between them. The hard boundaries of the 'organic human body' appear as a further abstraction and not as the primordial origin that the body image is built upon. The 'organic body' is a 'cultural' construct that emerges from the body image as it is socially negotiated under specific 'cultural' rules.⁶ An eventual reform of the body image brings with it the necessity to rethink the definition of the 'human' body that informs our social practices. In other words, the abstraction that the organic, anatomical body is, holds true (and consequently can be easily confused with a 'natural' given) for as long as the body images that it is predicated upon do not oscillate significantly outside of specific limits. Otherwise, the space is open to the quest for new socially and politically viable bodies, grounded on different sets of body images. And, since the body image is unstable and under continuous negotiation (as Grosz points out), these will be fragile, temporary bodies, appearing and disappearing, superimposed and intermingled.

If it is correct that *cellF* momentarily points the spectator towards a significantly different body image, then the problematic of embodiment that it opens up is more than a case of theoretical speculation, it is the problematic of our^(?) bodies (if personal pronouns retain any meaning) in all their physicality, that exist along and in tension with the institutionally reinforced 'natural' and 'organic' 'human' body.

There is a stringent question concerning the forms of interaction defined by (and that define) these flickering phantasmal bodies, and also regarding the political systems that could emerge alongside them. What kind of space do these bodies define? What ethical norms would fit such bodies that share parts of their nervous systems and that can act across national borders and geographical boundaries? It is not the place here to pursue these questions in-depth, nonetheless, their necessary emergence cannot be ignored. The (de)construction of the common understanding of the 'human' body, the (de)construction of the 'embodied human subject' is not a utopian project, it is a dangerous but necessary error (error in the sense of a movement that is not, and cannot be, guided by any telos).

6 This has several distinct if interrelated meanings: 1. on a large time scale, 'cultural' practices influence what the body becomes towards — our bodies are what they (never quite) are in their organicity as a result of 'cultural' practices; 2. what an 'organic body' is at each moment, what is 'natural' to the body, what its inherent limits are, is 'culturally' negotiated; 3. as a consequence (with Butler), we are always in a position of performing our bodies and their limits (in their supposed immediacy), and this performance is always heavy with a thick socio-political problematic.

V. Embodiment in Online Specta(c)torship

What kind of body is then instantiated in online specta(c)torship? What kind of body acts online? What kind of body moves and is being moved online?

Michele White in *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* criticizes the use of terms such as ‘movement’ to describe the spectator’s actions in on-screen environments because they contribute to the tendency to misrepresent the internet as a physical space. White contends that ‘[t]he spatial vernacular that accompanies Internet and computer settings makes it seem as though spectators can enter the Internet, be synonymous with characters and other depictions, and directly engage with other people’ (White 2006, 21), and that ‘[i]nternet “movement” makes it seem as though the spectator has a high level of agency when engaging with Internet settings’ (White 2006, 22). For White, such false promises grounded in a utopian understanding of digital technology end up disempowering the users, reproducing societal biases and reinforcing them (White 2006, 33-34), and prevent critical distance by presenting the Internet as animate, physical and unmediated (White 2006, 19).

While agreeing with White’s argument that the internet is far from being an unproblematic liberatory space where ‘human’ bodies discover degrees of agency and freedom hitherto unattainable, the position we are developing here insists that there is a stringent need to reassess the assumption that the body of the spectator conforms to the traditional limits of the ‘human.’ Of course, as ‘human’ bodies defined by our skins and our horizons we do not ‘move’ on the internet, yet a movement does happen and something is moved. The cursor does move on the screen, the image does change and it does respond to the click, a structure of presence is thus instantiated (and consequently, necessarily, also space), and an exchange does happen. A relational system is instantiated and it intensively becomes. And, as Marc Riees notes in *The Discovery of Pure Sociality in Early Net Art*, any system of relations is inherently related with ‘a spatial practice’ (Riees 2009, 69). Far from being unproblematic and liberatory this is the space of an essential crisis that has its promises as well as its dangers. As a spectator online I^(?) am affected and I^(?) do affect, I^(?) move and I^(?) am moved, a space emerges and with it a body, yet the kind of embodiment that constitutes this ‘I^(?)’ is anything but ‘human.’ In order to make sense, the question of agency, of empowerment and disempowerment, has to be reformulated with respect to these fragile, flickering bodies.

The institutionally reinforced limits of our individuality start to get blurred and the (mis)recognition that *cellF* proposes for its online spectators is a first movement of falling into this crisis. The questions that immediately raise are: how can we think the decentred, always already expanded individuals – these individuals that we ourselves, the spectators, (never quite) are – that appear in the light of such instances of specta(c)torship? What are the limits of this individuality and what kind of materiality does it have? Who moves and is being moved? How can we account for the relationship between these individuals and their technological interior/exterior environment?

VI. (De)Constructing the Embodied Thinking Subject

One can find any number of examples to sustain the claim that bodies extended beyond what could be confined to the limits of the 'human' are already a social reality and not merely a fiction for a distant future. We could turn briefly to Stelarc's 2015 performance *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED: Event for Dismembered Body* (or, more exactly, yet another online documentation of a live performance), as a salient instance of exposing and at the same time exploring the affordances of our technological environments with respect to the challenges they raise for the frames that define the 'human' and the unity and identity with itself of the 'human' body.

RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED: Event for Dismembered Body was an internet enabled performance that explored the physiological and aesthetic experience of a fragmented, de-synchronized, distracted and involuntary body — wired and under surveillance online. For five days, six hours a day, wearing a video headset and sound cancelling earphones, the artist could only see with the "eyes" of someone in London, whilst only hearing with the "ears" of someone in New York. The body was also augmented by a 7 degree-of-freedom exoskeleton enabling anyone anywhere to program involuntary movement of his right arm, using an online interface. (Stelarc n.d.)

It is the whole structure of presence to itself of the body that comes under question in Stelarc's performance. The body is not erased, it is affirmed, but as a multiplicity driven by thick mediations and not as the positing of an immediate unity. The technological networks extend the embodied subject while at the same time performing a caesura between the 'I' and the self, between the JE and ME of the 'JE ME pense' — what Deleuze formulates as the unacknowledged principle of the cartesian *cogito*. Deleuze contends that the cartesian 'I' (JE) is necessarily subtended by an embodied self (ME) as its material ground and that the correlation of the identity of the 'JE' and the chain of resemblances that constitutes the 'MOI/ME' cancels (following the exigencies of 'good sense' and 'common sense') the intensive fields of individuation into the figure of a self-identical embodied subject — a move which, Deleuze argues, pre-empts the understanding of the ontogenetic dynamic of difference and repetition and consequently it also pre-empts the understanding of embodied thinking (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 330-333). In *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED* perception and movement happen through the technological extensions and through this caesura between the 'I' and the self.

Nicolás Salazar Sutil writes with respect to performances by Stelarc and others that integrate electrical signal processing and computer coding in physical bodily movement:

Within this paradigm, materiality and message cannot be disentangled. Corporeal movement cannot be understood as a purely physical or material phenomenon; *it is not a phenomenon in which the physical body exists as an independent and standalone entity*. Body and code are fused, matter and language cross over, and *what stems from their copula is an unstable substance*, a trajective agency that defines the digital not in terms of a concrete materiality, but a materiality that is abstract-concrete. (Salazar Sutil 2015, 190) [my emphasis]

In light of the above discussion of the ‘organic body,’ we should underline that the *physical body* never exists as an independent standalone entity, but always as the trace of a performance, that is, as the trace of the emergence of limits and borders within this *unstable substance*, crossover of matter and language. *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED* destabilizes a specific way of negotiating the becoming of this *unstable substance*, it destabilizes a system organized around the presupposition of an embodied ‘human’ subject limited by its skin and equal with itself in movement and thinking. A rupture is performed in the identity of the moving body with itself, a crisis opens up. Performing ‘the body’ becomes a problem without a ‘natural’ solution.

RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED, beyond being an experiment performed upon/by a singular specific body — a specific instantiation of what, using Butler’s words, we could call a ‘self consciously denaturalized position’ (by which I mean performing the body aware of the performance itself and of its conditions, and in the case of this work especially aware of the affordances of the technological network)⁷ —, obviously also references more generally the condition of our contemporary bodies immersed in their technological environment. Once again, the online spectator cannot help but glimpse a distorted mirror image of themselves in the documentation of this work, entering the labyrinthine space of the crisis that *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED* opens. Moving means being moved, that is, being affected by impulses existing in an extended and extensible network of relations that *de facto* lacks a center, a network that always has to perform its center: the embodied subject — an embodied subject that moves (that acts), in as much as it is moved (affected) into (not quite) being itself. Problematizing the identity with itself of the embodied subject, works such as *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED* open the subject beyond itself towards the plane of affections, of intensities, of movements that produce it.⁸ *Self-consciously denaturalized* yet still subjected to the ‘law of nature’ (which intrinsically bears the logic of the construction of the self; construction of the self always performed on the socio-political plane) the embodied subject finds itself in crisis, the crisis of its own (im)possible identity.

Following Deleuze we should note that this *absurd* crisis is the precondition of thinking — in as much as thinking, according to Deleuze, relies on affections that disturb the interplay of the cognitive faculties, affections that disturb the *harmonious* interplay of the faculties upon which the identity of the subject rests and that in its turn is grounded in the identity of the subject.⁹ The *re-moved*¹⁰ body of the performer (but also of the spectator) is a body that falls into thinking through the aporetic gap that opens between the moving body and itself (by being *re-moved* from itself towards itself^(?)).

7 We have to underline that the very *self* of *self consciousness* is at stake in this performance, and thus the productive aporia intrinsic in Butler’s concept of a ‘self consciously denaturalized position.’

8 Cf. Brian Massumi’s understanding of the ‘body without image’ with respect to movement (Massumi 2002).

9 See Deleuze’s understanding of ‘thinking’ in the context of the critique of the ‘dogmatic image of thought’. (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 182-92).

10 I am borrowing this term from Salazar Sutil where it underlines the necessity to think how abstract and concrete movement feed into each-other, that is, the necessity to think how abstract movement is embodied and also how concrete movement is conceptualized, removed from itself in representation (Salazar Sutil 2015, 4, 6). For us, ‘re-moved’ refers primarily to the active/passive condition of the body moving and being moved beyond itself towards itself^(?) — the question of the representation of movement remains a very relevant aspect of the problem.

A sort of uncanny correspondence plays out between Lucier's *solo performer*, Stelarc's re-wired, re-mixed, re-moved body, and *cellF*. Lucier's music is removed from the performer: while being a product of their brain waves, it is a music produced by an unknowable otherness that subtends the self. Stelarc's body is removed from the subject, the embodied subject is split and re-moved by others. One ponders to what extent the bodies of the 'human' musicians in the live performance of *cellF*, integrated in the bio-techno-logical loop that the work is, find themselves in a similar crisis, moving and being moved together with the entire network that they are part of. And, of course, the spectator (especially the online spectator in their immediate proximity with the technological network) is such a body moving and being moved by/with the network of technological extensions. Movement and thinking appear in these instances as passions, as processes in which the agent is paradoxically (yet necessarily) *the patient*. As passions of the (de)construction of the embodied thinking subject: on the one hand in as much as the identity of the subject with itself is *denaturalized* (to use again Butler's term), on the other hand in as much as the *denaturalization* is performed from within the system, abiding by the 'law' (the logic, the logos of techno-logy) by breaking it towards an outside that the 'law' itself affords; also (de)construction because 'a body' unavoidably emerges from this performance, from this renegotiation of the limits of the embodied subject, from this unmaking of 'the body.' And we, the spectators, connected to our online environments (through the extensions that make us who we (never quite) are), (mis)recognize ourselves in the condition of this body that remains obscure and undefined.

VII. Conclusion

I proposed in this article that the process of online specta(c)torship afforded by the online documentations of *cellF*, *Music for Solo Performer* and *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED* open up a problematic that mirrors some of the underlying questions that these works explicitly engage with, namely: how do the supposed identity of the self and the supposed multiplicity of the bio-techno-logical network that grounds it fold into each other? This is a pertinent question not only for unpacking what is at stake in the works under consideration but, moreover, for understanding the type of embodiment that is at play in online specta(c)torship.

We cannot pretend that we have reached any answer, but what did become conspicuous through this critical exercise is that 1) the identity of the self is always already an erroneous answer to the problem of extended organic/inorganic networks that affect and are affected, move and are moved, towards a fragile a 'body image' that is continuously renegotiated; and that 2) the renegotiation of the 'body image' involves a performative (de)construction of embodied subjectivity – a (de)construction that is the precondition of moving and thinking in the space opened up by this crisis of identity. Thus, the insight that we gain is that the problematic of the embodied thinking subject, as it opens up in online specta(c)torship is not that of an 'I' consistent with itself that emerges from relations between a multiplicity of cells consistent with themselves, but rather that of an ongoing

misrecognition: an ongoing decentring of the 'JE ME pense' in a continuous renegotiation of the bio-techno-logical 'self' (cellF?) that grounds the 'I' and is in turn grounded by it.

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Problematika utjelovljenja u online gleda(c)torstvu

Sažetak

Digitalni mediji, a posebno raširena uporaba interneta, izazivaju naše iskustvo utjelovljene prisutnosti i posljedično nas tjeraju da preispitamo definiciju 'ljudskog' tijela koje informira naše društvene prakse. Polazeći od internetske dokumentacije o bio-umjetničkom djelu Guya Ben-Aryja *cellF* (2015.), temeljnom eksperimentalnom glazbenom djelu Alvina Luciera *Music for Solo Performer* (1965.) i Stelarcovoj izvedbi *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED* (2015.), ovaj članak sudjeluje u ovu raspravu postavljajući pitanje: koja je vrsta utjelovljenog identiteta oblikovana u online gledateljstvu?

S metodološkog stajališta, članak je u skladu s inzistiranjem Mieke Bal na važnosti studije slučaja u teoriji umjetnosti i filozofiji umjetnosti. Cilj mu je izvršiti filozofsku intervenciju u odnosu na suvremeno razumijevanje utjelovljenja polazeći od iskustva koje sugerira susret s određenim umjetničkim djelima.

Oslanjajući se na gore spomenute studije slučaja i na teorije utjelovljenja formulirane u različitim kontekstima – poput teorije afekta (Seigworth i Greg, Clough), feminističke kritike (Grosz, Butler), studija izvedbe (Salazar Sutil) i filozofije Gillesa Deleuze –, članak tvrdi da je problematika utjelovljenog subjekta, kakva se pojavljuje na internetu specta(c)torship, jest stalno pogrešno prepoznavanje: trajno decentriranje subjekta koji razmišlja (kartezijanskog cogita) u neprekidnom ponovnom pregovaranju biotehnološkog 'ja' koje utemeljuje 'ja' i zauzvrat je njome utemeljena.

Ključne riječi: online gledalište, utjelovljenje, filozofija medija, suvremena umjetnost, novomedijska umjetnost, teorija umjetnosti, filozofija umjetnosti.



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