

Excursions

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**(Re) Performing the Posthuman:
A Conference on Performance Arts and Posthumanism,
University Of Sussex, 21-22 May 2010**

From the moment you stepped foot into the registration area for ‘(re) Performing the Posthuman,’ you realised that this wasn’t going to be your run of the mill conference. InQbate at the University of Sussex is more reminiscent of a Hoxton gallery than a conference centre. In fact, even before reaching the registration desk, your eye was drawn to the various art installations that adorned this unique space. Mila Burghardt’s ‘Perfect Body (Living Sex Machine)’ immediately demanded closer inspection, with latex casts of intimate body parts suspended by an almost hypnotic video of women displaying their ‘perfect’ body parts. Intimacy seemed to be a theme for this miniature exhibition, with Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.ORG’s re-enactment of Marina Abramovic and Ulay’s *Imponderabilia in Second Life* occupying one screen, Holland Wilde’s disturbing and insightful ‘Liminal Thresholds’ occupying another, and Daniel Ploeger’s ‘Test #1/Test #2’ giving us a foretaste of what we could expect from his performance later that evening. The vast array of naked flesh - human, prosthetic, and virtual - present in this introductory space accidentally captured what would become the essence of the conference as a whole – that perhaps the concept of the posthuman brings us more firmly back to our bodies than ever before.

The sense that this conference hovered on the boundaries between conference and art continued as you entered into the main ‘room’, more like an elaborate studio than a formal academic space. This unusual setting infused the presentations with the feel of ‘performance’, with each presenter allowing their enthusiasm for the subject matter to permeate their talks. The first day opened with a keynote address from Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (Roehampton), entitled ‘Projecting the Posthuman.’ Like the exhibition that greeted you, Parker-Starbuck’s paper set the tone for the next two days, suggesting that as a cyborgian consciousness permeates global consciousness (just think about how awful it is to lose your mobile or not have the internet on tap, and you’ll understand), when we consider the ‘posthuman’, what is still at stake is an attempt to define what it is to be

‘embodied’. This posthuman consideration of embodiment, however, differs from previous theoretical approaches in that the ‘post’ permits us to move away from the ‘human’ body as the centre of understanding and broaden it out to any organic embodiment.

The panel sessions across the two days combined the work of established academics or practitioners and postgraduates, a recipe that can occasionally go awry, but which in this case, added to the energy of the conference. A clear highlight of the first panel session, ‘Live and Mediated Subjectivity’, was Professor Steve Dixon’s (Brunel) paper ‘Posthuman Performance and Paradox: Machinization, Dehumanization and Cybernetic Existentialism.’ A daunting title turned out to an entertaining and accessible talk, examining the artifice of the cyborg through the lens of Sontag’s definition of camp, and asking how parodies of the posthuman reflect a yearning for a return to nature that correlates to the ever-increasing machinization of our lives. Ildiko Rippel’s discussion of her work as part of Zoo Indigo in her paper ‘This is now, this is live’ also stood out, with an unsettling yet intriguing demonstration of her performance ‘Under the Covers’, followed up by a discussion of her work. Let’s just say I hope I never have to babysit over Skype.

The panel on ‘Posthuman Gender and the Uncanny’ particularly caught my attention, as the tensions that emerged between the panellists work seemed to get at the heart of what is problematic about the posthuman. Laura Bissell’s (Glasgow) Freudian examination of Polish performers, SUKA OFF, in her paper ‘Amorphous Bodies: The Technological Uncanny in Performance,’ and Francesca Ferrando’s (Roma Tre/Columbia NY) necessarily rapid-fire review of the posthuman in women’s art, ‘Cyborgs, Goddesses and Monsters’ both seemed to stress the significance of gender in discussing the posthuman. In contrast, Daniel Ploeger’s (Sussex) auto-critique of his performance ‘Sonic Intimacy- Exploring Posthuman Personal Space in Biosignal Performance’, and Kirk Woolford’s (Sussex) overview of his mid-1990s work on ‘cybersex’ in his talk ‘CyberSM and Teledildonics Revisited’ both queried the relevance of gender, or indeed sexuality, in very different ways. This was definitely a panel that got people talking at the buffet table.

Day one ended with lively keynote address from Rosemary Klich (Kent) on ‘Cyborgs, Robots, Mutants, and the Unfinished Human’, before the academic proceedings gave way to the purely artistic, with a series of performances from Daniel Ploeger in his inventive ‘SUIT (Sonic Prothesis)’, and Caroline Wilkins (Brunel) and Oded Ben-Tal’s (Kingston) eerie sound piece ‘Zaum: Beyond Mind.’ Day two continued this focus on sound with a fascinating talk about talking from Paul Barker (Central School of Speech and Drama) and Christopher Newell (Hull), called ‘Whose Voice Is It Anyway?’ Barker and Newell’s informal and accessible presentation was a real eye-opener when it comes to considering all things vocal. Examining the concept of ‘voice donation’ and examining how intensely our identities are bound up with voice, Barker and Newell asked whether computers should be trying to replicate the human voice, or whether they should deliberately remain ‘in-human’ and thus avoid plunging into Mori’s ‘Uncanny Valley.’

The panel sessions on day two suffered slightly from repeated deviations from the conference programme, with several presenters declaring they weren’t talking about what their abstract suggested they would be. Whilst in most cases, the papers were still of a high standard, it can be frustrating for those attending not to hear what they expected. Having said that, one such deviation proved to be a stand-out moment of the ‘Posthuman in (Music) Theatre’ panel, with Nicholas Till’s (Sussex) demonstration and discussion of his mixed media performance framing valuable questions about what constitutes authenticity in ‘live’ performance via the interaction between stage and film.

Sadly, this reviewer had to leave before the star performance took place, a guided tour of Stelarc’s Second Life Gallery, with the ‘man’ himself showing the conference around and interacting with the delegates via his avatar. A virtual collection of his performances, Stelarc’s museum included among other things videos of his various surgeries, from having an ear attached to his arm to the intensely intimate ‘Stomach Sculpture’ video. ‘Surreal,’ ‘intense’ and ‘compelling’ were how Stelarc’s ‘presentation’ was later described to me.

The joy of going to conferences of this size is that you have a chance to see every paper, as the panels took place one after the other. This was perhaps the downside too, as it can get exhausting sitting in the same space for two days running. However, the

unusual and airy setting, coupled with the ingenious use of beanbags instead of plastic chairs helped ease that conference claustrophobia. Overall, Seda Iltter and Daniel Ploeger should be congratulated for putting together such a stimulating and enthusiastic conference.