

"A Portrait of the Artist as a Work in Progress

by Stephen T. Asma

In this age of cloning and genetic engineering, a new group of "posthuman" artists is exploring the boundary between technology and the human body. The term "posthuman" refers to a group of artists who share an interest in combining art and technology. Some of these artists argue that technology will free us from our human body's limitations of time and space. For instance, Kevin Warwick, a professor of computer technology, has implanted microchips in his body that communicate to computers that are attached to lights and doors in his lab. When he approaches his lab and moves his body, the lights go on and the doors open. In two years, in a hospital in Japan, the French performance artist Orlan will finish her 10-year work "The Reincarnation of St. Orlan" by having surgeons construct the largest nose that her face is capable of supporting. During the surgery, Orlan will lecture on current postmodern theory and read from important philosophers like Beaudrillard and Lacan. Orlan has already had plastic structures implanted under the skin of her forehead so that it will look like that of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. She had her chin reconstructed on the model of Botticelli's Venus. While these operations were performed, she was dressed in costumes and her audience asked questions of her by fax, telephone, and e-mail. After these operations, the excess bits of skin and fat were stored in jars for display at future performances. What does it all mean? Is Orlan's work an expression of postmodernism, with its fondness for transforming earlier traditions? Is Orlan giving herself a postmodern face? Or, is the artist expressing herself through fashion, but instead of using clothing, is she using her own flesh? Perhaps Orlan is criticizing the way culture forces women to use cosmetics? Or, has she turned herself into a product for sale? About her work Orlan says, "My work is not against plastic surgery, but against the dictates of beauty standards which are impressed upon our bodies. . . . Skin is a mask, a source of strangeness, and by reforming my face, I feel I'm actually taking off a mask. My work ... deals with flesh; it is blasphemous." Another posthuman artist, Stelarc, takes a different approach to the connection between biology and technology. This performance artist fuses his own body with electrical/digital technology. He uses medical, robotic, and virtual-reality systems to explore and extend his body's boundaries. He has probed his body by amplifying the sound of his brain waves, heartbeat, blood flow, and muscle signals, and by filming the insides of his lungs, stomach and colon. One of Stelarc's early works was his "Stomach Sculpture." First he built a sculpture, a tiny capsule that contained a camera. He didn't eat for a day in order to empty his stomach of food. Then he inserted the capsule, which was connected to a computer cable and an external control box, down his throat. Once the capsule reached the stomach, he moved it around and illuminated the stomach. An image of the procedure appeared on the computer monitor. Other sculptors might hammer their thumbs while working, but Stelarc had other difficulties. "Even with a stomach pump," he reported, "excess saliva was still a problem, requiring that I remove all the probes on several occasions." When asked why he has done this, Stelarc responded, "The idea was to insert an artwork into the body -- to situate the

sculpture in an internal space. The body becomes hollow, with no meaningful distinctions between public, private, and physiological spaces. The technology invades and functions within the body not as a medical replacement, but as an aesthetic adornment. One no longer looks at art, nor performs as art, but contains art. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul, but simply for a sculpture." Another of Stelarc's creations is "Ping Body." In one performance, audience members in Paris and other cities were electronically linked, through a web page, to Luxembourg, where Stelarc stood with wires dangling from all parts of his body. These wires, which were muscle-stimulation contacts, were fed into a central computer. Then, audience members were invited to manipulate Stelarc's body from their distant locations. In other words, a person stationed thousands of miles away could push a button and make Stelarc's arm go up in the air. These posthuman artists are provocative, but many people question if their work has any beauty or, indeed, if it is really art at all. Some people argue that their art lacks social or artistic merit and that it has no reference outside the artists' bodies. Both Stelarc and Orlan are referred to by a single name; clearly they are – or wish to be – celebrities and intend to exploit themselves. *dui auctor*.

Question: Orlan and Stelarc would probably claim that they are following the examples of early 20th century artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dali who extended the definition of what art is. Do you think that the work of Orlan and Stelarc extends our understanding of art, or are they just playing with technology? In order to answer this, you will have to define art in your own words and relate your definition to specific art works, including those of Orlan and Stelarc.

Postmodern: Contemporary theories and practices in visual art, music, architecture and literature that are reactions against claims that there is a universal and objective truth. Blasphemous (adj.): Showing contempt for God or for things that are considered sacred; offensive.

Instructions: Read the attached essay and carefully consider the ideas that the writer has presented. Write an essay of approximately 500 words in response to the question posed below. You will have a total of two hours and forty-five minutes to plan and write this essay.

Your essay should: 1. Demonstrate an understanding of the topic presented in the reading material. 2. Present your argument(s) clearly. 3. Use examples to support and define your thesis. These examples should be drawn from the reading material and from your experience and/or observation. 4. Show that you know the mechanics of attribution, i.e. that you can quote or paraphrase from the reading material. 5. Demonstrate a grasp of sentence and paragraph logic. 6. Use correct grammar and spelling. Note: Be sure to proofread your final draft before you submit it.