

SOUND AND

You haven't seen the future until you've witnessed the technological obsessions of such performance artists as Stelarc, writes RUTH HESSEY.

SYDNEY, 1992: the city is being invaded by beings from another interface. The impact of their arrival will reverberate for decades. They are not wearing spacesuits, although the appearance of some may shock. They're not aliens, test-tube creations or scientists, although they operate in an area usually described as sci-fi.

They talk of cyberspace and technoids. They think about cyberfeminism, global culture and videoplacement. They bring with them their amplified bodies, laser eyes, cibarchromes, holograms and virtual spaces. They are not faceless automatons or *Blade Runner* replicants.

These invaders are artists, the most avant-garde of our time. And if your brain is already spinning, that's nothing to how it will feel by the end of next week, after the Third International Symposium on Electronic Art (TISEA) has made a playground of the city.

The symposium is described by its director, Ross Harley, as the Olympics of electronic art. He promises an atmosphere which combines "the phenomenal buzz of a rock gig with the intelligence of contemporary art".

One of the major stars is an Australian. Virtually unknown here but feted abroad, Stelarc is a small hairy man with a rich laugh and a well-muscled body. Off-stage he looks as casual and low-tech as an old coat, but he spent most of the 1980s naked, suspended over Copenhagen and other venues from a series of hooks inserted in his flesh to stretch the boundaries of what took place inside and outside his skin.

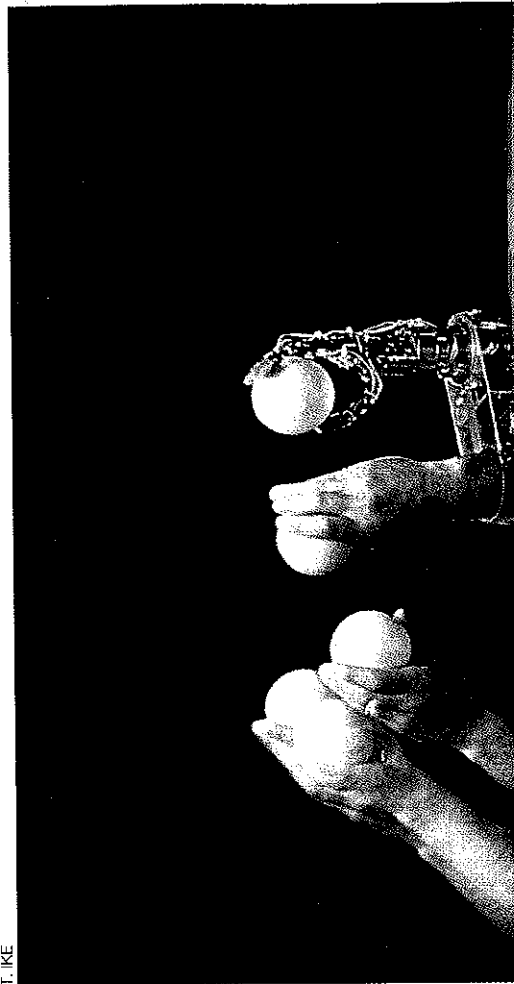
In the '90s, fitted with a robotic third arm and a "virtual" hand, his body covered in electrodes which trigger signals and sound, Stelarc's performances have gone far beyond stretching skin. In *Event for Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand*, Stelarc amplifies the sounds of his own brainwaves, contracting muscles, heartbeat, pulse and blood flow. Crackling with sound and light, he presents an awesome vision of the future of *Homo sapiens*, one which challenges many of our most primitive responses and

sophisticated notions. "Think of the body as an evolutionary projectile. In a sense we are all on technological life-support systems," says Stelarc, citing our dependence on global communications technology, telescopes, microscopes, CD players and cars. Technology has become "the new membrane of our existence".

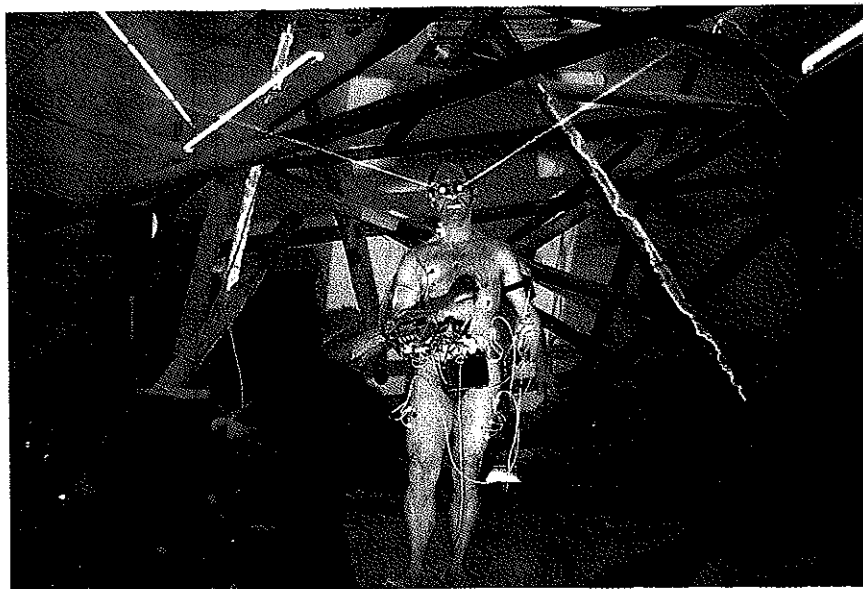
Stelarc (formerly Stelios Arcadiou before he changed his name by deed poll) is a traveller exploring the link between human intelligence and that of machines. While his penchant for pushing the boundaries of his physical being can churn some stomachs - he has even made internal films of his own colon and oesophagus - there are other artists playing on the edge of the future who have created exquisitely sensual worlds.

Benoit Maubrey's *Audio Ballerinas* are an obvious if slightly unsettling example. The delicate, streetwise fashion plates are the dancers of the future. Rather than moving to sound, they move through it.

Over their leotards they wear shimmering Perspex tutus which carry a variety of audio technology that receives, distorts, amplifies and samples sound as it reaches them, and then broadcasts it back to the great outdoors. Simply by shifting your



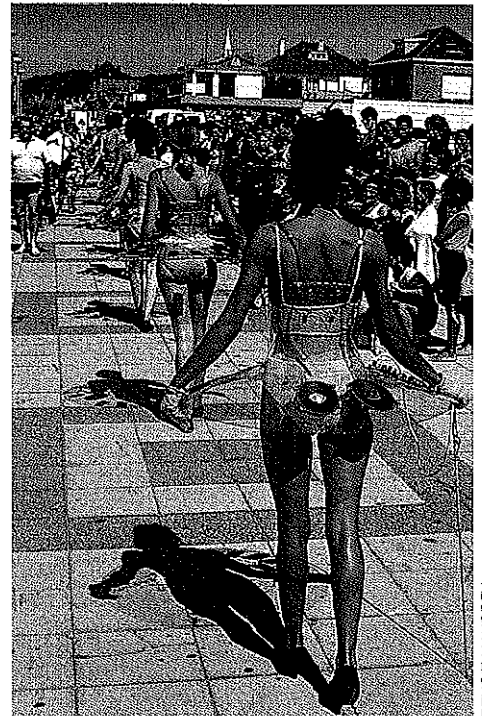
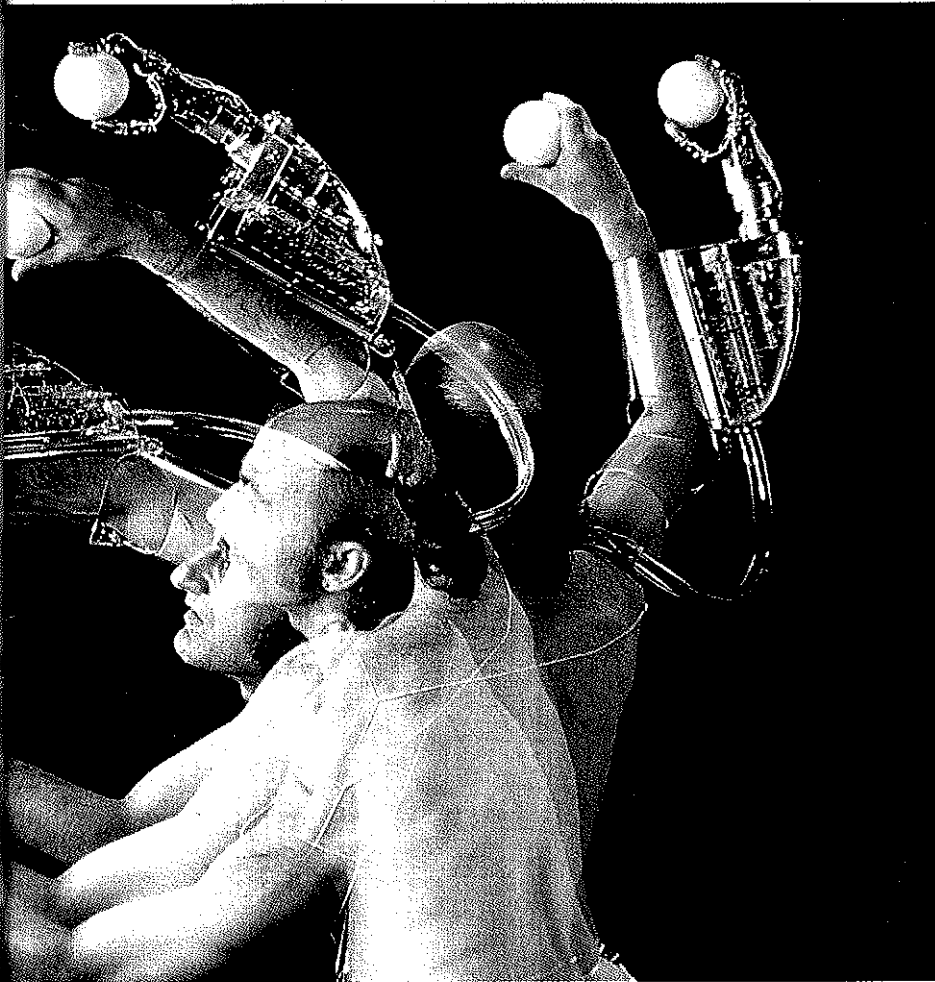
T. KE



T. SHINODA

VISIONARIES

Opposite page, top, 'All New Gen' is a futuristic tribune of feminism; bottom, Stelarc performing 'Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand'. Centre, Stelarc in 'Multiple Arms'. Below, 'Audio Ballerinas'.



BENOIT MAUBREY

position in relation to a ballerina you will change the sounds she is emitting.

At any of the 12 TISEA venues, brave new worlds will pose this question: what is the most intuitive way to interact with a machine? While the projections of the future popularised in films and books are almost invariably "mega-masculine" worlds – hard-edged, cerebral and unemotional – the reality, or virtual reality, can be as sensual, musical and responsive as sexual intimacy. In fact, the idea of virtual sex has been mooted.

There are two ways to enter virtual reality. You can don a special helmet and gloves and, through these, electronic impulses will cause you to see and touch hypothetical objects. Or, instead of wearing the apparatus, you can walk unencumbered into a room and immerse yourself in the sensory technology. "Artificial reality is the incarnation of imagination," says

Myron Krueger, a pioneer of virtual reality systems. "It can make any experience imaginable available to you."

The future world of virtual reality is about physically experiencing communication rather than just thinking it. "It's another step on from narcissism," explains Ross Harley. "An interactive narcissism. You can gaze at but not affect the world of the mirror. But in a Krueger environment objects respond to your touch and your movements via a complete repertoire of video, computer graphics and electronic music."

Insists Stelarc, "Using technology in this way doesn't mean we are mechanising our mentality. We're not turning the body into a machine. Machines are invading the body. It's something the human species has to face."

With artists at the forefront of the technology invasion, instead of fear of the

future we can experience "the benign essence of technology", as Krueger calls it. The more "unpredictable and catastrophic" that artists are in their use of technology, the better, says Stelarc.

Enter our local heroine, All New Gen, the star of an installation of the same name which will also be at TISEA. She is the creation of VNS Matrix, four Australian artists who have challenged the "fembot", or female robot, stereotype of women with their Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century. Characters from VNS Matrix's early *Cybererotica* series feature in this installation: a walk-in, simulated computer-game environment called Gamegirl (which Nintendo addicts will recognise as tongue-in-cheek).

The enemy of All New Gen and her posse of brave new girls, the Homegirls, is a computer terminal. Big Daddy Mainframe, the omnipotent omni-processor of a futuristic military-industrial complex.

"Gen," say her creators, "is a fantastic and sexually subversive female presence which inserts itself into a futuristic technological landscape." Her mission? To sabotage Big Daddy. □

Ruth Hessey is a Sydney-based writer. TISEA is on from November 9 to 13. For details, phone (02) 360 2943.