Stelarc is the artist who grew an ear on his arm. Growing an ear on your arm should be funny, right?

Stelarc (originally Stelios Arcadiou) explores how bodies can be liberated from familiar limitations and opened up as a host for remote agents. The growth of ear-shaped flesh on his arm was not the oddest part of this ‘performance’. It took Stelarc fifteen years to find a surgical team prepared to undertake the operation and there was a wireless-enabled microphone implanted under the skin so the ear could broadcast.

Stelarc’s idea was to have his body enabled and activated by remote users – multiple inputs to a split body. After the insertion of the mould to shape an ear, the wound became infected to the extent that Stelarc thought he might lose his whole arm. Eventually he lost just the microphone.

Not so funny now.

Still not funny was Stelarc’s recent suspension on 16 flesh-hooks over a giant sculpture of his own arm, with its ear.

Stelarc undergoes major surgical intervention for reasons of art, not the necessities of disease, disability or injury. How interesting then to see him interrogated by a disability rights activist whose own body-modifications are visited upon her.

Liz Carr is a comedy writer as well as a disability activist. She interviewed Stelarc at the DaDaFest International, the UK’s largest Disability and Deaf Arts Festival. Carr identifies as a disabled woman, whereas Stelarc, she says, is ‘a man with an ear on your arm, so I guess we’re both freaks.’ His laugh is, as Carr points out, exactly that of a mad scientist in a gothic horror film, which provokes the laugh again.

Stelarc states that, as his art has demonstrated, physical bodies are increasingly obsolete in the face of ever-blossoming technological possibilities and hence it is Carr’s digitally distributed voice, performance, activism and comedy work that is the critical self rather than her wheelchair-transported body.

Carr works as a BBC journalist and presenter and, when her personal assistant got sick, none of her usual help-mates were around. She describes her acute embarrassment at her dependence on her septuagenarian mother arriving in London from Liverpool, to ensure that
Carr got to work. Worse, as a forty-something woman, Carr was dependent on her mother, who had misplaced her reading glasses, to switch on her office computer.

So much for obsolete bodies in a virtual future. Embodied care, and the physical labour of care still matter.

Recently Stelarc has described himself as being 'fitter than I've ever been and my body weight will be the lightest it's ever been.' Having removed the 16 flesh-hooks after his latest 'performance', Stelarc had only one bleeding wound and ten 'minutes later, bandaged and in his kimono, Stelarc is shaking hands and joking.' Stelarc's physical fitness and embodied capabilities are utterly central to his practice.

During the DaDa interview Stelarc recommends Carr’s film ‘Wheelchair Wedding Dance’, choreographed with reference to the film ‘Dirty Dancing’. The film is funny and moving and comments on living with an impaired body in a hetero-gendered world (among other things). So Stelarc has got a sense of humour.

Drawing the DaDaFest interview to a close, Carr pulls up her sleeve. ‘We've got more in common than you might think,’ she tells Stelarc and reveals a plastic fake nose taped to her forearm. ‘Because I've got a nose on my arm!’ (Pause for audience laughter) ‘And it only cost me fifty pence!’

(This entry is a shorter version of a book review that appeared in ‘Sociology of Health and Illness’ in 2012).