

Paulina Sztabińska

Department of Art History, University of Łódź

paulina.sztabinska@uni.lodz.pl

DIGITAL PERFORMANCE AND AVANT-GARDE ARTISTIC DISTINCTIONS

Abstract: Digital performance is an artistic phenomenon isolated at the beginning of the 21st century. In the subsequent years, the scope of interest of the researchers analyzing this phenomenon has extended not only to new projects, but also to the works constituting its “prehistory,” dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, and to selected avant-garde projects from the first half of the 20th century. This interest has resulted in a number of theoretical studies on digital performance, which is associated on the one hand with the latest achievements in information technology, and on the other with human bodily performance, frequently contrasted with technology-based approaches in art. Digital performance seems to be a concept integrating both of those areas. Basing on this example, one can examine the various manifestations of apparent interdependence between its components, as well as the evolution of the issues that were of interest to the historical avant-garde.

The present author argues that digital performance is a unique artistic phenomenon that does not fit within the usually employed theoretical categories. There are three possible perspectives from which it can be approached. Firstly, it might be considered in the context of postmodernism, as a kind of postmodern hybrid, a cross between the tendencies previously regarded as opposed (e.g. in avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art). However, as suggested by such authors as Steve Dixon, it is also possible to separate it from the postmodern strategies and see it as a manifestation of the hidden aspirations of artists from both the first and the second half of the 20th century. In the new artistic phenomenon, they have taken on an explicit form thanks to the use of the latest technological developments. The second interpretation of digital performance is to regard it as a characteristic manifestation of cyberculture, combining the biological and the technological (cf. Roy Ascott, R.W. Kluszczyński). According to this interpretation, it functions “in-between” (in interspaces and “intertimes,” revealing the multidimensional fluidity of the contemporary world. The third of the theoretical perspectives discussed here reflects the views of W.J.T. Mitchell and Mindy Fenske. Contrary to the cybercultural interpretation, which presupposes the convergence of the performative and the digital, the existence of a dialectic opposition between them is emphasized here. Overcoming it through transition from thesis to anti-thesis in order to achieve synthesis (or, using different terminology, dialogue negotiation) involves searching for a connection between biology and technology, even if the result of this search is still incomplete and not definitive. The concept of dialogue assumes that even if performativity and digitalism are converged, the original nature of the starting elements is sensed, and it is possible to consider different ways in which these elements are involved in the dialogic interaction.

Keywords: digital performance, Avant-Garde, postmodernism, cyberculture, performativity, “dialogical interaction”.

Digital performance is an artistic phenomenon which was noticed in the beginning of the 21st century. It is considered that the occasion on which it emerged as a distinct entity was the research project initiated by a request sent out in 1999 to the major artists using computer technologies and employing performative activities in their artistic endeavours, asking them to submit documentation of their works. The materials thus obtained formed the basis for the establishment of the Digital Performance Archive (DPA).¹ In the subsequent years, the range of the collected materials expanded, encompassing not only new projects, but also works that constituted a “prehistory” of sorts, dating from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as works by the avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century. At the same time, theoretical studies on the new phenomenon began to emerge; a phenomenon which, on the one hand is linked with the latest developments in information technology, and on the other with human bodily performance – frequently juxtaposed with technology-based approaches in art. Digital performance seems to be a concept integrating both of those areas. Basing on this example, one can examine the various manifestations of apparent interdependence between its components, as well as the evolution of the issues that were of interest to the historical avant-garde.

Steve Dixon, author of a comprehensive monograph on digital performance, writes that this concept should be understood as covering all actionist projects, “where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms.”² Enumerating the various employed techniques, he includes digitally produced or manipulated projections, performance based on the actions involving robots or virtual reality, installations and theatrical works implemented with the use of instruments equipped with sensors or telematics techniques. In addition to this, or perhaps in the first place, he considers performative works and other activities available via the computer screen, such as cybertheatrical events, MUDs, virtual worlds, computer games, CD-ROMs and performative net-art activities. The line between the “live” and artificial components is drawn in different ways. It is therefore impossible to classify the collected material by identifying fixed types of relations between the biological and technical components. In addition, they have been assigned different meanings in artistic actions. The matter is further complicated by the fact that when discussing the issues of digital performance, Dixon refers to the artistic experiments from the early 20th century (especially selected achievements of Futurists, Dadaists, the Bauhaus and Russian Constructivists), as well as the neo avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. He points out that new theatrical and ballet

¹ Cf. S. Dixon with contribution by B. Smith, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media In Theater, Dance, Performance Art., and Installation*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, 2015, p. IX.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

projects incorporate elements of technology similarly to the early manifestations of performance art. In many cases, it is precisely the meeting of the “live” and the mechanical that is an important element of the authors’ artistic philosophy. Usually, however, both types of components are treated as a means of expressing meanings, recognized by the avant-garde as being of primary importance. This was the case, for example, with the first attempts to use digital technologies undertaken in the 1960s. The author draws attention to the performance of Laurie Anderson, pointing out that

Anderson’s use of digital technologies, and particularly her creation of new instruments, effects, and sounds, bears testimony more to her drive to find the most appropriate means of communicating what she wants to say, than to any formalist approach to technology, or desire to experiment with it for its own sake. [...] Anderson experiments and creates with digital technologies in exactly the same fashion as she experiments and creates with everything else – to maximize the effectiveness of her statement, using myriad available tools – digital, nondigital, analog, nonanalog, organic, inorganic.³

In this situation, it would seem appropriate to treat digital performance as a broad category encouraging free combination of various media and including them within the framework of postmodern tendencies. Dixon examines the role of digital media in relation to the idea of postmodernism, considering two of its aspects. The first is related to the emphasis that its representatives (both artists and theorists) have placed on the importance of recycling. The postmodern perspective entails that artistic concepts are simply, endlessly, and variously, based on the use of what was found, also in the past. He contrasts this position, however, with the view that technological practices and systems change, that they are subject to development and can be considered as truly new and different at particular moments in time, both formerly and in the recent decades. Thus Dickson argues that we cannot describe modern art, especially with respect to the latest technology, as based on recycling. The idea of novelty as an important artistic category is not confined to the avant-garde, to the short period in the early 20th century. On the other hand, one should not overestimate the role of the new technologies used by artists, or, especially, reduce the development of art to the transformation of the technical means employed. Dixon argues against the view expressed by Lev Manovitch, who wrote that the greatest contemporary artists are computer science specialists, and that the greatest masterpiece is the new technology itself. This “digital culture commentator,” as Dixon calls such theorists, claims that the Web is the largest intertextual work, more complex, unpredictable, and dynamic than the novels written by James Joyce. The most important interactive work is the

³ Ibid., p. 108.

human-computer interface itself. Dixon opposes such fetishization of technology. He says that the concept of “technology for technology’s sake ... has tended to mar rather than advance critical understandings of the relationships between technology and art.”⁴ He also proposes to “analyze the particularities of *performance* and *performances* in relation to how they have adopted and utilized technological developments in varied ways in order to create different types of content, drama, meanings, aesthetic impacts, physiological and psychological effects, audience-performer relationships, and so on.”⁵ It can be said, therefore, that this suggestion is aimed at incorporating digital performances, despite their often shocking difference, into the general principles of art contemplation and its aesthetic reception.

The second perspective from which the relations between digital performance and postmodernism can be considered involves its tendency to “consume” other trends. Dixon observes that digital performance connects the old to the new in a “classically” postmodern way. He claims, however, that this should rather be treated as “an emergent avant-garde, [...] rather than merely a manifestation of a wider, all-consuming postmodernism.”⁶ To justify this view, he cites Andreas Huyssen on the one hand, and Peter Bürger on the other. The former maintained that technological development in the 20th century had a major impact on the emergence of the avant-garde. New technologies were not only a source of inspiration for the artist's imagination, introducing such features as dynamism, machine worship, the beauty of technology, constructivist and productivist attitudes, but also penetrated into the heart of the work itself. The latter author defined it as an attempt to organize a new life practice based on art. Dixon believes that all these qualities can be seen in digital performances. Although he agrees that they no longer reflect the interest in influencing fundamental social change and transforming the way in which collective life operates, typical of the classical avant-garde, in some of them one can see the need to make art practical again. Critical Art Ensemble and Electronic Disturbance Theater are cited as examples. However, it is difficult to assess the extent to which they are typical and whether their activities are balanced by the large number of theatre and ballet spectacles and performances in which the use of digital effects is clearly ludic in character. It is therefore possible to say generally that “digital performance’s impulse toward the creation of the new avant-garde forms and a more radical engagement with the nature of virtual realities places it outside the confines of dominant postmodern paradigms.”⁷

Searching for a theoretical model to interpret the phenomenon of digital performance, one can also refer to research on the “realm of media reality.” As

⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

a consequence of its emergence, “liminal areas were created, places of contact, interaction, and interpenetration of the media world and real world.”⁸ It is from them that digital performance is derived. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński believes that the nature of the border on which communication between the virtual reality of the media and the real and material world occurs is fundamental. It has become “at the same time a source and model for all other borders, whose existence has been caused or modified by the media.”⁹ It is characterized by instability, variability, as much of time as of space. It is possible, as stated by the Polish author, to consider it as “extraspacial and extratemporal, since – as a *sui generis* mental phenomenon – it lacks these dimensions, but merely refers to them, a process in which we observe a continuous exchange of quality.”¹⁰

How do these traits relate to the arts of performance? Reflection on this issue has evolved over the years. In the 1960s and 1970s, the opposition of performance against the objective character of painting and sculpture, and its anti-technological attitude were usually emphasized. Thus, action art was treated as being anti-media. Performance was meant to overcome the “reification” typical of the visual arts. It was associated with the slogans of liberation from the alienation and commercialization that plague the modern life. Morawski wrote that the goal of performances, as well as other, ideologically similar manifestations of neo-avant-garde art, is “the recognition of the randomness and ephemerality of phenomena, and an attempt to reach all the potential encoded in humans, explore and manifest it, especially during play or in a ‘ritual,’ and in addition to stage a spontaneous protest against all forms of enslavement of individuals and the destruction of the natural resources.”¹¹ Thus, they were humanistic and concentrated on people who did not need a reference to technology in performance art, and freed themselves from media and mediatization. The body of the artist has become a medium that could carry content. This would be different in the case of another, technological-media variety of creativity. Here, Morawski asserted,

the starting principle and the destination [...] is to build structures, algorithmic in the highest degree, and to obtain a result similar to that of an engineer, an

⁸ R.W. Kluszczyński, *Spółeczeństwo informacyjne. Cyberkultura. Sztuka multimedialna*, Rabid, Kraków 2001, p. 149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1985, p. 265. It should be noted that Morawski addressed this issue twice. For the first time, he presented the typology of avant-garde trends in the article “Awangardy XX wieku – stara i nowa”, *Miesięcznik Literacki*, 1975, No 3, p. 53-72. For the second time – in the abovementioned book. In the latter case, however, the author paid less attention to classification and commented more broadly on the contexts of the particular varieties of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde.

IT specialist, or an expert on electronics. Also taken into account is the symbiosis of man with his technology, with the world of artificial devices, and a change in the way of seeing reality through these mediations.¹²

Within this neo-avant-garde model, a reference was thus made to modern technological devices, the coupling of art and technology, the mediatization of human activities.

In his analysis, Morawski sought the worldview bases of these choices. He believed that they were not completely contradictory, that they converged in the specific cases of artistic accomplishments. However, he believed that this convergence should not blur the basic differences between the worldview options. He wrote that

The main demarcation line runs between conformism and contestation, and between the technological-scientific and the philosophical-anthropological vision of today and tomorrow. It is ultimately these decisions that determine the concept of the artist – either as a manager of information resources, or a builder of enormous spectacles, a designer of alternative realities, or a guide through the labyrinths of today's culture and civilization.¹³

According to Morawski, an artist-performer is a representative of the second option. He does not base his activity on the possibilities offered by the new media, nor does he succumb to their seductive influence. If he takes them into account in his activities at all, it is not as a partner he interacts with,¹⁴ but merely as an object of criticism or a neutral means of documenting his activities.¹⁵

Today, the concepts of culture based on the existence of the opposition are contrasted with the idea of cyberculture. Writing about the “transformation of the world” resulting from the invasion of the media and especially the advancement of digital technology, Kluszczyński points out not so much the accompanying disappearance of borders, but their increasing fluidity. Consequently, “our lives are conducted in unique interspaces and intertimes, in the hybrid world ‘in-between.’”¹⁶ He focuses on one of the elements of this approach – the relation between reality and virtuality – presenting two perspectives on it. The first assumes that the interpenetration of the real and the virtual leads to “an invincible multiplicity of the world,”¹⁷ expressed in ontological transgressions. The second per-

¹² S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie ...*, op. cit. p. 264.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹⁴ In some performances from the 1960s and 1970s, electronic devices were featured. An example is the work by Wolf Vostell, who included TV sets broadcasting current programs in his actions and installations. However, the purpose of using these media components was to criticize the mass culture that enslaves man.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Baudrillard, *Słowa klucze*, transl. S. Królak, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2008, p. 36-42.

¹⁶ R.W. Kluszczyński, op. cit. p. 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

spective, inspired by the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, assumes that we lose the ability to differentiate between the two, and that reality and virtuality converge, forming new kinds of reality, called simulacra. Gradually, they displace and replace formerly predominant forms of existence, and therefore the French author wrote about the disappearance of reality. With regard to the issues being of interest here, such a situation would result in performances blurring the boundaries between the real body and its media simulations, engineering an exchange between them. However, Kluszczyński, like many other researchers of cyberculture, favours the first of the abovementioned perspectives. He believes that one of its advantages is that it allows us to better understand the processes taking place in modern reality without falling victim to excessive generalizations. The pluralism assumed in this view suggests new types of interaction between the technological and the biological. He notes that

the development of the media has led to the development and transformation of the technosphere. Initially, it was perceived in opposition to the biosphere. Contemporaneously, with the emergence of a post-biological world, it is rather believed that the boundary between them becomes as fluid as the boundary between the real world and the virtual reality of the media. Both of these domains have made up a biotechnosphere, internalizing their mutual relationship and dynamizing their borders.¹⁸

By employing the concept of the post-biological world, the Polish author refers to the conception of Roy Ascott, who wrote about the advent of the “post-biological era.” The noun used in the phrase, referring to the temporal consequence, suggests that the processes occurring today mark a new period in history. It is characterized by fluidity, and resistance to opposition. Shaping the new world, however, is not based on the negation of the existing one (as was suggested by the avant-garde), but is performed by absorbing it into a new whole. In the opinion of the British author, this process is taking place in different areas. In the world of the media, Ascott sees a change that involved overcoming the existing opposition between “dry” and “moist” media. In his short text *The Future Is Moist*, he synthesizes the concept of interspace between the silicon and dry world of virtuality and the moist world of nature. In the post-biological era, the two will converge. Ascott sees it as a distant edge of the communications network. He writes:

It is my contention that moist media will constitute the substrate and vehicle of the transformative arts of the new millennium. For some years now artists working at the edge of the Net have been exploring Artificial Life technology. More recently, the whole field of biotechnology has begun to be taken on

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

board – neuroscience, genetics, molecular engineering, nanotechnology – all are the subjects of artists' attention.¹⁹

In this way, art participates in the emergence of postbiological culture, and at the same time enters the “new artistic trajectory.”²⁰

The English author believes that this approach is constructive. Thus, it can be considered that it breaks with the tradition of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde protest, destructive and critical actions, and promotes the concept of art as building a new world. It also rejects the expressive and contemplative tradition characteristic especially of the visual arts. The aim is not to present existing realities. “The building of new worlds is what it is about: new entities, identities, new meanings and values. Art based in moist media will be conceptually driven, behaviourally based, technologically assisted.”²¹

Is there a place for performance art within the scope of such a concept of art? As we remember, Morawski associated it with the attempts to reach the potencies encoded in man, to explore them and protest spontaneously against all forms of enslavement of the individual. Such an actionist approach, which played a very important role in the 1960s and 1970s, is certainly not taken into account here. Nevertheless, its rootedness in human biology, the reference to the body as a material element, remains valid. However, interest in these factors is subject to a reorientation. They are to be used not in opposition to technology, but in cooperation with it, not against virtualization, but as part of the search for contact points with it or principles of co-existence. At the same time, as Ascott points out, a change is occurring in the field of new technologies. He has claimed that the dominant trend at the threshold of the 21st century will be the new definition of nature, the concept of Nature II and the search for how to “re-create ourselves in a world which is neither simply digitally dry or biologically wet.”²² Under such circumstances, technologically oriented art will be characterized by a departure from “the cultural ethos of the 'immaterial' to a 're-materialisation of art.’”²³

In the field of performance art, this phenomenon is probably most clearly visible in Stelarc's works. He started his career in the 1960s with group multimedia projects. Later, he went on to performance actions, the starting point of which was his own body. He tested its sensitivity and limitations and sought to go beyond it by using technical devices designed for this very purpose. From actions that involved hanging his body suspended on hooks piercing his skin in a variety of ways, he moved on to projects involving biological factors whose capabilities were intensified and technologically transformed. The most famous project of

¹⁹ R. Ascott, *The Future is Moist*, “Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les Arts”, 1999, vol. I, p. 85.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

this kind is *Third Hand* – a metal prosthetic device with electronic controls, which was supposed to aid the functioning of the two biological hands of the artist. In an interview, Stelarc said: “It was the experience of weakness and imperfections of the body that aroused in me the desire to expand it. The *Third Hand* is therefore not so much a prosthetic replacement, as an extra accessory for the body.²⁴ It is not a symbol of absence, but “an image of excess.” It indicates the unused capabilities of the body that can be taken into account in collaboration with technology. The *Third Hand* became an “intimate interface,” a part of the body that is electromyographically moved by abdominal and leg muscles. The artist used it during performances, or presented it as an object displayed at exhibitions. *Extender Arm*, 2000, was similar in character. In this case the device increased the range of Stelarc's right hand. These works comprise the *Amplified Body* series. Commenting on these actions, Kluszczyński wrote:

As part of these presentations, Stelarc used physiological processes originating deep inside his body as their primary material, which, as a source of impulses, shaped and directed the course of various events, building the structure of the performance: sound emission, light and video projections. In this way, the performance was transformed into a specific, biotechnological environment [...].²⁵

This art thus transcends the division between art and media. It is simultaneously a performance, a visual art object, and part of the environment.

The “transcendence of the body” based on the search for a synthesis between biological and technological elements, was also present in Stelarc's later works, although it occurred in other contexts. While the examples mentioned above were based on the conviction of the “obsolescence of the body,”²⁶ the following ones take into account thinking and will. The work *Prosthetic Head* from 2005 examines the problem of head transplantation, together with the issues of human awareness and communication functions. Piotr Zawojki writes that this is a reference to the question of artificial intelligence and the “philosophical machine,” and at the same time a reference to the philosophical conceptions addressing the issue of human thinking. Thus there is again a question of the function of our body (when thinking is considered in relation to carnality, as in the views of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) and its obsolescence. Zawojki notes that “In this project, the artist returns to the problem of the ‘obsession with individuality,’ demonstrating once again that in

²⁴ *Rozmowa ze Stelarkiem. Rozmawiał Maciej Ożóg*, in: *Stelarc. Mięso, metal i kod. Rozchwiane chimery*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, Gdańsk 2014, p. 41.

²⁵ R.W. Kluszczyński, *Spółczesność informacyjna ...*, op. cit., p. 196.

²⁶ Stelarc used this phrase in an interview with G. Hall and J. Żylińska (cf. J. Żylińska, *Ewolucja Stelarca*, in: *Stelarc. Mięso...*, op. cit. p. 100).

the times of network communication, the idea of a single body endowed with unique, 'finite' consciousness is just as obsolete as our body."²⁷ The work also uses an element of replacement, which is the image of the artist's head, but the event is discursive in character – the head answers the questions that it is asked. Thus, it can be considered as an equivalent of an "avatar duplicate," as Zawojcki describes it, which stands in for the artist in answering the questions.²⁸ However, it is possible that in time, with an increased database, it will become autonomous. Therefore, a reference to the idea of posthumanity is also present here. "A human being will be neither a real body nor a machine, but an autonomous entity multiplied by the network and the digital media. This humanoid will have all the characteristics of an alternative being of a chimeric nature, composed of a number of bio-components and technological prostheses, which will function in reality extended to the virtual and cybernetic dimension."²⁹

If we regard Stelarc's works as performances, then in the light of the terminology in this field worked out by Richard Schechner, Erica Fischer-Lichte or Peggy Phelan, they should be considered as "performances outside performance" – turning into something that undermines the essence or ontology of this kind of art, and even contradicts it. First of all, we can ask (considering e. g. *Third Hand*) whether, if we are dealing with the artist in person, biological carnality forms complex relations with the mechanical devices as a reference point for their presentation? We do not really what is presented: whether it is the body entering various relationships that is of primary importance, or the invented device, for which the body is only a reference point or a correlate. The next question concerns the Prosthetic Head: can the statements made as a reaction to the audience's questions by Stelarc's head resembling Stelarc's own appearance – be regarded as a performative work? From the scope of the artist's biological presence, only his voice remains. And also, could it be said that the actions which the artist does not undertake on the basis of his own decisions, but which are remotely controlled by the audience (*Ping Body*) are performances? It is not possible to answer these questions unequivocally.³⁰ The audience which directed Stelarc's actions only watched his image on the computer screen and reacted to it, ordering him to perform specific activities that the electronically-controlled artist had to execute. Can we say, then, that there is a connection between the biological and the technological, or rather a tension between the two spheres and the disclosure of opposites?

²⁷ P. Zawojcki, *Kim jest i co mówi nam Stelarc*, w: *Stelarc. Mięso...*, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Two Polish artists who formed the group *Sędzia Główny*, carried out performances similar to this concept. During the action presented on television, they behaved in accordance with the suggestions made by the viewers over the phone.

The questions I have formulated are not intended to undermine the concept of “digital performance,” but merely to draw attention to the fact that the existence in interspace, in intertime, in the hybrid world “in-between” is more about contrasts, discussion, change from one oppositions to another and attempts to unite them, than about fluid and non-colliding unification of what was treated as entirely contradictory in the 20th century avant-garde. Mindy Fenske draws attention to this aspect of digital performances, linking it to the “unfinished aesthetics.” The starting point for her reflections is the article by W.J.T. Mitchell, devoted to the issue of artworks in the age of biocybernetic reproduction.³¹ The author draws attention to the contemporary fascination with new technologies employed in performance, on the one hand, and to the research on its ontology on the other, which inspires him to search for the defining characteristics of performance. These approaches are competitive and each of them aims to dominate the other. At the turn of the millennium, the dispute reached the stage of stagnation, because none of the concepts could gain an advantage over the other. Fenske believes that this state of affairs cannot be overcome, but should be differently interpreted. She proposes, therefore, to include the relation between bodily materiality and technological virtuality into performance, not as opposition or supposed unity, but within a dialectic relationship.

In the aforementioned article Mitchell states that we are not quite post-human yet and we are still struggling with our real material condition. Despite the positive and productive potential of our digital and virtual identities and the emerging rationality of post-humans and cyborgs, there is still resistance to embracing this potential. It is manifested in several ways, from the treatment of bodily practices as a form of protest against simulations, to treating digital technologies as yet another disciplinary discourse that seeks to control and manipulate bodies. Thus, the ideological contexts in which the technological model of the avant-garde was juxtaposed with the model defending humanistic values and human freedom have not disappeared completely. However, according to Fenske, differences can be observed. Instead of a simple opposition there emerges a field of dialectic relationships. Therefore, we can speak, to borrow Michael Heim's formulation, of “cyberspace dialectics,” which we can navigate in different ways. This navigation can be multidirectional and can have different destinations. It therefore negates the simple, binary organization of the field in which it occurs, taking into account a more complex system.

Fenske first takes into consideration the position of the body within this dialectic field. She believes that its situation is usually treated as an “either/or” relationship. In the cyber-era, the problem of the reality and materiality of the body does not disappear, as evidenced not only by the performance projects that emphasize its

³¹ W.J.T Mitchell, *The Work of Art. In the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction*, “Modernism/Modernity”, 2003, no. 10, pp. 481-500.

role, but also by the commonly encountered procedures of tattooing and piercing. These practices can be understood as “a protest against the ideology of identity construction and simulation.”³² In the case of cutting one's body, it cannot be presumed that it is just play with what is strongly associated with the sense of our identity. The irreversibility of the resulting marks must be interpreted as a protest against the notion that everything can be changed. “The body in this case,” Fenske says, “is a site of refusal.” The body refuses to succumb to the provisionality and performativity of identity by attempting to mark its reality through permanence.”³³

And how should we then understand Orlan's surgical performances, which, according to their many interpreters, complicate the issue of identity construction? Are the surgical treatments that Orlan undergoes an expression of the emphasis on identity, or its virtualization?³⁴ Fenske believes that neither the former nor the latter is correct, if considered separately. The work of the French artist relies on a dialectic transition from the thesis to the antithesis, and the search for the possibility of synthesis, which, however, is never completed. “Orlan's performance,” writes Fenske, “calls identity into question, while simultaneously reaffirming the force of the body's corporeality. [...] The question becomes whether or not the body's corporeality is separate from (a mask), or the location of, identity”.³⁵ Taking into account other examples, the author notes that even such artistic discourses that intentionally aim at breaking the binary dialectic structure eventually restore it. One example of this is the activity of The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE members emphasize in their theoretical publications that data have become the center of social life, and our organic body is nothing more than an image representation of individual data. The bodies exist, but not for the socio-economic apparatus. Instead, there is a “new body” functioning in this domain, which results from the interference of the biological organism with the ideological-engineering entity. Despite this diagnosis and the sad perspective associated with it, which predicts a “cyborgic identity” of the modern human, CAE representatives do not suggest that one should fear or fly from the current situation. “Their call,” writes Fenske, “is for disruption or non-rational interventions than resist this structure.”³⁶

The examples mentioned above, referring to theoretical stances as well as artistic activities, show that the belief in the interpenetration or even homogeneous uniformization of the components of cyberculture is unduly generalized. It does not tolerate conflicts that caused the polarisation of positions during the avant-garde

³² M. Fenske, *The aesthetic of the unfinished: ethics and performance*, “Text and Performance Quarterly” 2004, no. 1, p. 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁴ Kluszczyński employs the latter method to interpret her works, classifying her, alongside Stelarc, as „a representative of virtual body art.” (*Spoleczeństwo informacyjne ...*, op. cit. p. 200).

³⁵ M. Fenske, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and neo-avant-garde periods. At the same time, opposing views are interrelated and interdependent. As regards the problem under consideration in this section, according to Fenske, we “neither valorize nor condemn either corporeality/materiality or digitality/virtuality.”³⁷ The artists and theorists she discusses seem to suggest that “there ought to be a way to engage these concepts without reproducing binaries that reject the human for the post-human or unrealistically reject of embrace the possibilities of virtuality. The problem is that within these efforts to escape the binary, their rhetoric tends to reconstruct it.”³⁸

It is in this context that Fenske refers to Stelarc's work. However, unlike the other authors who write about him, she does not stress the merging of all the ingredients and aspects of his work “into a single hybrid post-biological network.”³⁹ She does not believe that it expresses “the concept of the synthesis of a biological and technological element, the fusion of flesh and metal, software and hardware, which in his works are organized into a new hybrid network order using the digital element – the code.”⁴⁰ In agreement with Mitchell's view, she argues that Stelarc “is like a virtual surgeon because he is both materially connected to his art through, for example, a prosthetic device, and distanced because spectators may control his movements.”⁴¹ According to Fenske, despite efforts aimed at arranging the coexistence of intimacy and distance, the dialecticity of cyberspace is revealed here.

Expanding the analogy between the situation of a surgeon and Stelarc, the author points out that in the former instance, in the virtual world, possibilities are considered and attempts are made to solve the problem, which later find application during the medical procedures performed on the real body. In the case of the performer, however, technology is not a range of exercises, but an integral element of the changes that are made in the body. It may be a prosthetic device (e. g. *Third Hand*) and may be controlled by muscle or breath, but it may also allow the public to influence the artist's behavior (e. g. *Ping Body* or *Prosthetic Head*). In both cases, however, there is no intentional assignment, as in the case of surgery. There is a separation between the “cyber” and the “corporeal.” Searching for the possibilities to bring them closer together forms the content of the performer's actions. Thus, it is not unity that is revealed, but the binary character and a chance for dialectic relationships between biology and technology.

Fenske suggests that they should be approached with reference to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where speech is understood as a confrontation of at least two voices, as well as the associated ethics of responsibility. She therefore suggests that questions of digital performance should be addressed not only in technological,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ R.W. Kluszczyński, *Wprowadzenie*, in: *Mięso ...*, op. cit. p. 10.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 11-12.

⁴¹ M. Fenske, op. cit., p. 5.

but also in ethical terms. This is about the responsibility related to the actions, which, based on the English translations of Bakhtin's texts, she describes as answerability. This word has a double meaning. It means responsibility to someone, as well as something one can answer. The two meanings appear in Bakhtin's approach to the aesthetic act of contemplation, which is understood as the relationship between "I" and "the other", as well as between "life" (participation, experience) and "culture" (theory, abstract). Something is answerable "when these two 'faces' are unified and made responsive to each other, rather than existing on separate planes or looking in opposite directions." The ethical requirement is therefore that the dialectic of biological life and technological virtualization should take the form of a dialogue. It is unethical, in contrast, to aim at a simplistic understanding of the body, for example through its normalization (regulation, standardization, typification). Ethical practices of performance assume many forms.

The above considerations indicate that digital performance is a unique artistic phenomenon that does not fit within the usually employed theoretical categories. There are three possible perspectives from which it can be approached. Firstly, it might be considered in the context of postmodernism, as a kind of postmodern hybrid, a cross between the tendencies previously regarded as opposed (e.g. in avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art). However, as suggested by such authors as Steve Dixon, it is also possible to separate it from the postmodern strategies and see it as a manifestation of the hidden aspirations of artists from both the first and the second half of the 20th century. In the new artistic phenomenon, they have taken on an explicit form thanks to the use of the latest technological developments. The second interpretation of digital performance is to regard it as a characteristic manifestation of cyberculture, combining the "wet" and the "dry," *the biological and the technological*. According to this interpretation, it functions "in-between" (in interspaces and "intertimes," revealing the multidimensional fluidity of the contemporary world. The third of the theoretical perspectives discussed here reflects the views of W.J.T. Mitchell and Mindy Fenske. Contrary to the cybercultural interpretation, which presupposes the convergence of the performative and the digital, the existence of a dialectic opposition between them is emphasized here. Overcoming it through transition from thesis to anti-thesis in order to achieve synthesis (or, using different terminology, dialogue negotiation) involves searching for a connection between biology and technology, even if the result of this search is still incomplete and not definitive. The concept of dialogue assumes that even if performativity and digitalism are converged, the original nature of the starting elements is sensed, and it is possible to consider different ways in which these elements are involved in the dialogic interaction. It should be also noted that in the latter concept, the issue raised by Morawski in connection with the two orientations of the neo-avant-garde – technological and performative – returns. This time, however, from the perspective of the early 21st century, these are not two fundamentally contradictory artistic options concerning the principles of cultural development, but a single one, comprising a dialectic correlation

between artificial and natural bodies. Nevertheless, it does not lose its awareness of humanistic issues, including ethical ones, which used to be inherent in the original perspective of performance.

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DIGITALNY PERFORMANS A AWANGARDOWE PODZIAŁY ARTYSTYCZNE (streszczenie)

Digitalny performans jest zjawiskiem artystycznym wyodrębnionym na początku XXI wieku. W następnych latach zakres zgromadzonych przykładów był powiększany nie tylko o nowopowsta-jące realizacje, a również o prace stanowiące rodzaj „prehistorii”, pochodzące z lat 60. i 70., oraz o wybrane dokonania awangardowe z pierwszej połowy XX wieku. Jednocześnie zaczęły pojawiać się opracowania teoretyczne dotyczące tego zjawiska, które z jednej strony związane jest z najnowszymi osiągnięciami elektroniki, z drugiej zaś odnosi się do cielesności człowieka, którą często w sztuce przeciwstawiano zabiegom opartym na technologii. Dlatego na jego przykładzie można prześledzić różnorodne sposoby występowania zagadnień, które stanowiły przedmiot zainteresowania historycznej awangardy.

Przedstawione w artykule rozważania wskazują, że digitalny performans jest szczególnym zjawiskiem artystycznym, nie poddającym się konceptualizacji w ramach zwykle stosowanych kategorii teoretycznych. Po pierwsze można rozważać go w kontekście postmodernizmu, przyjmując, że jest rodzajem ponowoczesnej hybrydy stanowiącej rezultat skrzyżowania tendencji uważanych

wcześniej (np. w sztuce awangardowej i neowawangardowej) za przeciwstawne lub, co sugeruje np. Steve Dixon, poprzez oddzielenie go od strategii postmodernistycznych i dostrzeżenie w nim rezultatu ujawnienia się dążeń występujących w postaci ukrytej w poszukiwaniach artystów zarówno z pierwszej jak drugiej połowy XX wieku. Przybrały one jawną postać dzięki zastosowaniu najnowszych osiągnięć technicznych. Druga wersja interpretacyjna digitalnego performansu związana jest z uznaniem go za charakterystyczny przejaw cyberkultury, łączącej w całość to, co biologiczne i technologiczne (Roy Ascott, R.W. Kluszczyński). Przy tej interpretacji funkcjonowałby on „po-między” (w między-przestrzeniach i między-czasach), ujawniając wielokształtną płynność współczesnego świata. Trzecia z omówionych w artykule perspektyw teoretycznych nawiązuje do rozważań W.J.T. Mitchella i M Fenske. W przeciwieństwie do interpretacji cyberkulturowej, zakładającej zjednoczenie elementu performatywnego i digitalnego, akcentuje się tu występowanie dialektycznych opozycji między nimi. Ich przewyższanie na zasadzie przejścia od tezy do antytezy w celu osiągnięcia syntezy, czy też, stosując inną terminologię, dialogowe negocjowanie, zakłada poszukiwanie związku między biologią a techniką, jednak wciąż niepełnego i nie ostatecznego. Koncepcja dialogu wskazuje, że nawet wówczas, gdy dochodzi do zjednoczenia performatywności i digitalności wyczuwalny jest pierwotny charakter elementów wyjściowych i możliwe jest branie pod uwagę różnych sposobów ich „dialogicznego obcowania”.

Słowa kluczowe: digitalny performance, awangarda, postmodernism, cyberkultura, performatywność, “dialogiczne obcowanie”.