

BEYOND FLESH:

**an investigation into the representation of the human body
that exists beyond the boundaries of the 'normal'**

by

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DECLARATION (A)

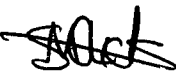
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ABSTRACT

This exegesis examines, and defines, the visual representation of the human body within the framework of particular fantasy idioms. It also decodes the ideologies supporting these representations. It is the continuation of an artistic program exploring contemporary ideas on the status of the body. It initially concentrates on sub-cultural modes of expression that have emerged over the last two decades, specifically the rhetoric of American and Japanese cyberpunk, the cyborg, and Japanese animation (*Manga*). Within these arenas, the focus is upon the representation of the *female* form, and how visual codes within the set mediums, express anxieties towards the generative power of women.

The central focus of the cyber ethic is the desire to regard the body as redundant, particularly with consideration to the latest developments in science and medical engineering, and the increasing worldwide interaction with cyberspace; a two dimensional plane where only consciousness is required - true to the dualist tradition. American and Japanese cyberpunk have developed distinctly generic characteristics, resulting in a bizarre variety of visual representations of the desired human form for the next millennium. Both mediums, however, dominated by male artists and theorists, provide abundant examples of the difficulties posed by the female form. If, as American cyberpunk suggests, the way of the future is to abandon our inept mortal identities and download our consciousness, then it follows that the presence of a female parthenogenetic entity is problematic to this creationist ideology.

The characters who inhabit cyber fiction are unrepentantly bland and two dimensional. Ultimately, the result of the cyber enthusiasts' encompassing penchant for denial and negation of the physical is a selective ideology that reflects the ideals of its creators. They continue to perpetrate a dualist tradition, exchanging the experience of the flesh for a more responsive and pliable package, devoid of the challenges of sexual difference and power. Their configuration is a depthless future, where fantasy has lost all traces of real experience. This thesis challenges cyber ideology, by presenting the forgotten elements of its dialogue; realisations of the missing links and aestheticised fears of a fantasised new world.

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"Our society suffers from a schizophrenia of dichotomy. Somebody made it up, this dualism, this dichotomy; it's hierarchical. It separates people from their environment - culture from nature, men from women, body from mind, body from spirit. All things that are closer to the earth - like the earth itself, females and the body - are lower on the hierarchical scale, and therefore, everybody suffers in our society because they don't know where they are."¹

The title of my project, 'Beyond Flesh', refers directly to my investigation into how the body is constructed in the genres of the Fantastic.² I began my investigations by selecting a number of mediums that exhibited a tendency to represent the female form as monstrous. The areas I chose, such as the animated Manga comic and cyberpunk film, were examined due to their rapid increase in popularity over the last decade, supported by a strong sub-cultural network of ideas and desires. Essentially, I was searching for visions of the human form for the next millennium in order to translate my interpretation of these alternative bodies into sculptural form. A body of sorts is being born in the collective cyber-consciousness, I have experienced it; through the flickering of electronic pulses on screen, via my fingers slipping over the greasy buttons of a console, directing my masculinized alter-ego towards another spine crunching blow.

Yet, ironically, the more I searched for this 'posthuman' body, the more obsolete it became. In cyberspace, in electronic mediums, in other worlds, physicality has become redundant, a mere prop for the idealised hallucinations

1. Kiki Smith, quoted in *Ingre's Eroticized Bodies - Retracing The Serpentine Line*, Carol Ockman, Yale University Press, USA 1995, p.138, from the cited article 'An Interview With Kiki Smith' by Robin Winters (Amsterdam, Institute of Contemporary Art), 1990.

2. For the purposes of this project, cyberpunk, science-fiction and horror texts are generalised as one genre, specifically relating to their shared agenda of representing female generative power as confronting to patriarchal society.

of its creators. In many respects the cyber human represents a drive to objectify human bodily experience, to download our abject interaction with the world into the confines of the screen, and to reinforce the idea that subjective identity is entirely formed in the mind. Cyberheads refer to their flesh casings as 'the meat'.² The allusion of a jellyfish is closer to the truth, a spineless, redundant organism at the conceptual heart of cyber dialogue. However, this amoebian appearance is not the form of a cyberbody - one is more likely to be confronted by the sight of a six-armed set of pectorals propped on mechanical legs, than something that has recently oozed out of the primal soup.

In the past my artistic practice has examined the status of the body in popular culture and how representations of the physical reveal traces of our anxieties and desires. I have also concentrated upon how perceived knowledge of science and medicine can influence this visualisation. My enquiries have been informed by feminist writing on the body, particularly works that challenge the way psychoanalysis frames the physical; as an objective form that can be controlled by drives and desires.³ Feminism examines the implications of a binary model for the female body, especially with regard to the site of generative power, the womb.

2. This popular term is appropriated by cyberculture from William Gibson's influential novel *Neuromancer* (1984) in which bodies are abandoned in favour of 'downloading consciousness'. The term has been described as a communication of "the frustration that people dealing with an infinitely expandable infosphere feel at the limitations imposed upon the wandering mind by the demands of the body". *Mondo 2000: A Users Guide to the New Edge*, Ed. Rudy Rucker, R.U. Sirius and Queen Mu, Thames & Hudson Press, Great Britain 1993, p. 170.

3. An influential text on my practice is *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* by Elizabeth Grosz, Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd., NSW Australia, 1994. In this work Grosz considers the notion of the 'Body without Organs' (the BwO). The BwO describes the body as an entity that, rather than being perceived as a blank slate upon which we can ascribe desire, is instead considered as a form capable of experiencing its own "depth, interior and subjectivity" (p. 160). Of particular interest is chapter seven, 'Intensities and Flows'.

Continuing within the framework of popular culture's visual mediums, cyberpunk fiction and its associated polemic provide abundant illustrations of anxieties towards the feminine body, with its biological difference and capacity for reproduction. This project aims to represent models of those fears in the context of a broad-ranging inquiry within contemporary visual arts, especially artists that counter issues concerning the construction of physical identity at the end of the twentieth century.

The body I discovered, as it is visible in fringe cultures like cyberpunk, with its techno-futurist manifesto,⁴ is a continuation of a dualist model of representation. Dualism is a western tradition of philosophy that, following the principles of Descartes, encompasses the idea that the human mind and body are formed separately, the body dependent upon the mind for the formulation of identity. This notion, which structures most of contemporary psychoanalysis and science, is influential in the formation of cyber rhetoric pertaining to the body. Utilising a binary model Dualism theorises that experience and identity are conceived purely on a psychical level. The body, therefore, is not included in our subjective experience, our ego, being instead a collection of sensations and messages for the mind to absorb and then project identity onto.

If subjective experience totally excludes the perception of the body, then a fleshless experience is entirely plausible; for a cyberpunk, even desirable. If the body is meat, the mind can be defined as the sole location of identity. This belief, expressed in texts like *Neuromancer* and films such as *Johnny*

4. *Techno-Futurism* is a term associated with the belief that new technologies will *always* be beneficial to the development of society. It is an extension of the Futurist artist Filippo Marinetti's dictum, "Progress is always right even when it's wrong". For an interesting elaboration see *Future Visions: New Technologies of the Screen*, Ed. Philip Hayward and Tania Wollen, British Film Institute, London 1993, especially 'Surpassing the Real', pp. 1-9.

Mnemonic ⁵ supports the desire to 'download' consciousness and exist as beings where the physical is redundant, the body now residing in the distant memory of a new, fleshless life form. Cyberpunk hounds the body to extinction by the desire to mould its form to suit the demands and expectations heaped upon it. The mind is the focus of power, and the weak, mortal body can be propped up or transformed to satisfy our psychological drives.

"Cyborg is a science-fictional shorting of cybernetic organism. The idea is that, in the future, we may have more and more body parts - arms, legs, hearts, eyes, and so on. The logical conclusion is that one might become a brain in a wholly artificial body. And the step after that is to replace your meat brain by a computer brain."⁶

The cyborg is an example of the way in which genres such as cyber and science fiction visualise the body as a totally mutable force, divested of psychical traces and power. Their vision of a future human form is totally reliant upon the promise of science, utilising its discoveries as the basis for their drive to remove the threat of mortality that the physical represents. Proponents of cyberculture, such as R.U. Sirius,⁷ claim that we are already cyborgs considering our current physical interactions with medical technology, pacemakers, plastic surgery, genetic engineering and so forth.

In her book *Ingre's Eroticised Bodies*, author Carol Ockman refers feminist

5. Artist Robert Longo made his directorial debut with *Johnny Mnemonic* (1996), a film starring Keanu Reeves in which Reeves plays an information courier who carries data by directly feeding it into his brain. The narrative centres on the problems that arise when Reeves' employers erase his early life memories to 'free up' more storage space in his brain. *Johnny Mnemonic* is based on a short story of the same name by William Gibson.

6. *Mondo 2000* (1993), p. 66.

7. R.U. Sirius, programmer and part-editor of *Mondo 2000* magazine, is one of the most influential figures in American cyberpunk. He describes cyberspace as "the collection of human experience - mediated by the mind - on tiny slabs of silicon. It involves (hu)man at play with the creation of life, at war with the limitations of biology & time." *Mondo 2000*, (1993), p.16.

historian Donna Haraway and her influential essay 'Manifesto For Cyborgs'. Haraway defines the cyborg as both a construction of fiction and a lived, real identity, utilising the experiences of patients with artificial body implants and prosthetic limbs. She believes that, because the cyborg is configured as a hybrid, there is much to be gained by fusing the dualities of its construction, further melding the physical and psychical together in a subversive critique of a binary definition of the body. This notion functions perfectly with regard to the cyborg, but ultimately it appears that the fusion of man and machine is only a step in the attainment of the real cyber goal - the desire to either totally recreate our biological facility, or, better still, *transcend* that state so man can finally disassociate himself entirely from the constructs of the natural.

Haraway's use of the technology of medical science as an example of how the cyborg may be of benefit to humanity can also demonstrate the problematics of this desire to reconstruct the body. Any brief foray into the field of prosthetics will graphically illustrate the intrinsic collaboration between the mind and body, and how they are dependent on each other in the formation of identity. The most often used example is the perplexing case of the phantom limb, which occurs in three to seven percent of all amputees⁸, sometimes lasting for decades. The existence of a real, chronic pain *emanating from* a limb that is no longer part of the body poses many questions regarding how we may conceptualise and respond to our own bodies. As Bertrand Russell describes,

"When you feel a pain in a leg that has been amputated, where is the pain? If you say it is in your head, would it be in your head if the leg had not been amputated? If you say yes, then what reason have you for ever thinking you have a leg?"⁹

8. *The Culture of Pain*, David B. Morris, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, USA, 1991, Chpt. 7, 'Pain Is Always In Your Head', pp. 152-157, looks at how cases of the phantom limb demonstrate the possibility that body and mind are inextricably bound together (p.154).

9. Morris, p. 152.

Research into the chronic pain epidemic that now plagues Western culture indicates that the desire to replace our fatigued bodies is a very simplistic, binary approach that denies many psychological facets of our existence. The fictional cyborg is a being where power is independent of, but given to, the flesh. The body is simply a vessel to be manipulated. Cyberculture defines the body as a collection of replaceable parts because the dualist basis of their beliefs allows that this is possible; identity is an entirely psychical state, so it is therefore possible to use new technology to invest the body with props for a post-human future. Recent developments in science, such as cloning, have added further ambitions to the cyberpunk vision. Rather than alter, via surgery and implants, our physiological structure, interest now lies in the capacity to selectively create our future form, whether it be physical or otherwise.

The drive to consciously choose the structure of the human body is currently an issue under examination by many contemporary artists, producing a variety of interpretations. Mark Dery points to Damien Hirst's sculpture 'Some Comfort Gained In The Acceptance Of The Inherent Lies In Everything' (1996), describing the work as a

"melancholy memorial to the forgotten body that hackers snidely deride as 'meat' in an ever-more-disembodied, on line world."¹⁰

Hirst's presentation of deconstructed cows' bodies in twelve separate glass cases, so that the viewer is forced to literally intersect the physical being of a cow (coupled with Hirst's emphasis that one of the cows died giving birth) suggests that human intervention in the construction and function of aspects of the physical is a contentious issue in the formation of the artist's work.

10. Review of 'No Sense Absolute Corruption: Damien Hirst, Gagosian Gallery, New York 1996' by Mark Dery, *World Art*, issue 4; 1996, Gordon & Breach Publishing Group, Australia, p. 84.

Australian artist Jon McCormack describes his digital-based art as "a lament for things now gone and a celebration of the beauty to come."¹¹ McCormack creates self-generating, artificial life-forms from digital 'genetic' codes, taking a less didactic and negative position in the technology/body debate. By simulating life, McCormack considers the possibility of our conception of existence extending to include silicon-based life-forms. As the artist, McCormack places himself in the position of creator, a type of contemporary Dr Frankenstein, working to produce a new definition of 'life-form' from the tools of science and technology available to him. The result is work that challenges our understanding of what is natural, and focuses the viewer on the issue of how artificial life will be regarded in the power structures of contemporary culture.

In a similar inquiry (although with entirely different conclusions!) the work of Patricia Piccinini literally translates the promise of genetic engineering into fact. In the 'Mutant Genome Project' (TMGP™) series,¹² Piccinini presents a synthesised, desirable, commodity driven vision of the future, the commodity being the perfect human. Her settings are lurid, artificial, constructed in a style reminiscent of the visual imagery of cyberculture, particularly the landscape of computer games. In 'Your Time Starts Now...' (1997), psychedelic flowers drift aimlessly in the background, not locatable as objects in space themselves, appearing to suggest they are part of a huge ether of a million flowers to which Sophie Lee and her mutant baby belong. This is the desire of cyber dreams -

11. Jon McCormack cited in 'Jon McCormack: Booting Fantasia' by Annemarie Johnson, *Art/Text*, issue 56, 1997, p. 27.

12. A response to the Human Genome project, which is currently attempting to completely map a strand of human DNA, which consists of billions of chemical parts.

but not nightmares. The impeccably ordered world of Piccinini's vision is a place of success. The women who display their tastefully selected LUMPS (genetically constructed children!) are beautiful models and glamorous pop-icons who use their bodies for the advancement of their careers, not redundant and physically unnecessary biological processes like childbirth - a gestation period for these women is something to do with their bank statements! Piccinini attempts to counter the impact of new scientific techniques on the construction of the *feminine* body and identity by literally presenting the most extreme possibilities for procreation, in a future where we may *create* the 'perfect' baby. In doing so, she calls into question the "marginalisation of women from the reproduction process."¹³ Piccinini's work surmises that if we can engineer the human form then the womb may no longer be needed.

In fact, it is on the issue of reproduction, my investigations have revealed, that the most notable visual cyber anxieties towards the female form emerge. Within cyber discourses, the female body is often presented as monstrous, the deviance consistently associated with the womb. Woman's ability to reproduce poses problems for a visualised future of total subjective experience and body control. Given that *current* techniques in cloning and genetic engineering still require the womb and its associated, life-supporting functions, and that cyberpunk is a mostly male oriented genre¹⁴, it is not surprising that women could be situated as a destabilising threat to the desires and aspirations of the

13. Catalogue essay for 'Nothing Natural, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania 1997', by curator Helen Stukkey.

14. John Perry Barlow in his essay 'Leaving the Physical World' writes of cyberpunk: "Most of the current population is male, white, affluent, young, well-educated, English-speaking, and suburban." From *The Virtual Reality Casebook*, Carl E Locffler and Tim Anderson, Van Nostrand Rheinhold, USA 1994, p. 183.

genre. As a result of these insecurities, women are often presented negatively within cyber discourse, the 'problem' of the feminine bodies' reproductive power manifested in a diverse number of ways. An introductory example can be found in the character of The Borg from one of the icons of cyberculture, the *Star Trek* series (in this case, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which ran from 1988 to 1995). The Borg are a collective consciousness, one identity constructed of a billion egos. The flesh of The Borg body is almost entirely gone, replaced by implants, tubes and wires, a visual representation of the drive to belittle the importance of the physical in the construction of identity. They exist as psychical beings, their bodies disassociated from the self, instead residing as living props for the sustenance of their starship. The purpose of The Borg is simply to assimilate new lifeforms into the collective; as they do so, claiming "resistance is futile", the ship grows.

The Borg starship is an entirely square construction consisting of a myriad of separate square components that lock together, housing the Borg bodies while their consciousness roam the collective neural net. This is the real horror of the Borg - the ship is structured as a motherbody, a monstrous, evolving, maternal figure, physically sustaining the community in order to nurture and shape *her* identity, the *single* identity that is The Borg. The ship and its inhabitants terrify because they threaten assimilation into the hive that is the motherbody. This may be interpreted to suggest that, if the power of generation and reproduction is determined by the feminine body, then the desire to live as a psychic identity could be perverted, the collective consciousness instead becoming the brood of a monstrous matriarch. *First Contact* (1996), the most recent *Star Trek* movie, went one step further than the series, literally presenting the physical origins of the ship's identity:- a female mutant, her body consisting of an exposed spine, some breasts and a head, linked to the ships' consciousness via umbilical-like

cords that protrude from all over her bizarre body. Woman, as controller of procreative power, threatens to disrupt the fabric of cybercultures' fleshless vision of the future.

In order to further understand why the female form is considered threatening to the cyber agenda, in the course of my readings Barbara Creed's *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* was influential. In this work Creed defines woman through the proposition of the monstrous-feminine. This definition asserts that patriarchal society considers woman terrifying because of her power for creation *and* destruction. Creed, via a critique of the genres of science-fiction and horror, presents several different aspects of the monstrous-feminine; of particular interest to this project were her configurations of woman as 'archaic mother' and woman as 'abject womb'. Creed's analysis is a useful text, as both of these models of the monstrous are visualised in cyberculture's representation of the feminine form.

The archaic mother, Creed explains, is an ancient, matriarchal figure, a threat because she functions *outside of* symbolic order. Her text centres on patriarchal society's binary definition of mother and father, especially woman as *fertilisable*, the maternal figure associated with reproduction, the womb, the 'natural' order. Man is the *fertiliser*, the provider and progenitor, and ultimately the father and 'the law'. The archaic mother, Creed continues, is a way of defining the maternal figure differently, a figure that is not considered "always in relation to the father, the representative of the phallus ...if we posit a more archaic dimension to the mother - the mother as originating womb - we can at least begin to talk about the maternal figure as *outside* the patriarchal family constellation".¹⁵

15. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed, Routledge Books, TJ Press Ltd, Cornwall, England 1993, p. 26.

The archaic mother is a manifestation of the threat of creation outside of the ordered structure of patriarchy. She represents the power of life and death, the abjection of birth, "the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and end".¹⁶ She is the visualised male anxiety towards woman rejecting her biologically determined role within patriarchal order and somehow becoming the horrifying ideal of a self-perpetuating organism. The archaic mother is independent of masculinisation due to her ability to singularly create life. My research has revealed that this embodiment of the monstrous feminine is present in cyber mediums, a response to the procreative possibilities offered to patriarchy by scientific progression, particularly cloning, genetic engineering and IVF programmes.

Shinya Tsukamoto's cyberpunk film, *Tetsuo 1: Iron Man*, for example, provides many illustrations of the fear of creation outside of patriarchal society. The plot structure of *Iron Man* is relatively simple. A Japanese man, the 'fetishist', is hit by a car driven by a young couple and left to die in a forest. Somehow (and this is never clearly defined), the piercing of 'the fetishist's' flesh by metal acts as a catalyst for a complete physical transformation. As his body begins to metamorphosise, the 'fetishist', psychologically traumatised by the changes his body is experiencing, pursues his attacker, the 'salaryman',¹⁷ and in a maniacal act of revenge deceives him into a similar encounter with steel and flesh; the 'salaryman' cuts himself shaving, startled by 'the fetishist' projecting an image of himself into the 'salaryman's' bathroom. Both men's bodies are consumed by the progression of the technological invader spreading like a disease through the flesh, eating away at their physical identity.

16. Creed (1993), p. 20.

17. 'Salaryman' is the Japanese equivalent of 'white collar worker'.

Iron Man configures creation as homosexual, the birth of a new life form entirely constructed by the male participants. The feminine body, by contrast, is visualised as an 'absence'. The only active female character, 'salaryman's' girlfriend, is murdered by her partners' new, revolving, razor-sharp phallus - her genitals and womb are drilled out, leaving a hollow corpse divested of its sexuality and function. In order to reinforce the idea that creation outside of patriarchal boundaries is fraught with danger, *Iron Man* frames the union of the 'salaryman' and the 'fetishist' within the encompassing presence of the archaic mother. There are feminine elements to *Iron Man*, yet they have no solid physical identity. This recalls a discussion by Creed, in her essay on the *Alien* trilogy of films, where she argues that

"...although the archaic mother as a visible figure does not appear ...she is there in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womb-like imagery, the long winding tunnels leading to inner chambers ...She is the generative mother, the pre-phallic mother, the being who exists prior to the knowledge of the phallus."¹⁸

The entire mis-en-scène of *Iron Man* is suggestive of an archaic presence - the world which these demented humans inhabit is completely internalised, as if their bizarre reconstruction takes place inside some giant womb. The rooms are small, dark and claustrophobic, the streets which they speed through on their rocket-laden feet are devoid of any sign of life, and the train tunnels refuse to provide any refuge from the abject horrors of their transformation. 'Iron Man' creates himself outside of society in the monstrous domain of a matriarchal womb. The archaic mother is represented in absence, symbolically via the enclosed spaces, umbilical-like power cables, and pools of water, constantly referencing the archaic womb as the site of 'Iron Man's' bizarre, unnatural

18. Creed (1993), pp. 19-20.

transformation. Ultimately, the female body is no more than a suffocating prop for procreation, sustaining 'Iron Man' during his traumatic foetal stage. When the two men have become one, their 'brains turned to metal', 'Iron Man' is ready to leave the womb in favour of a new habitat, cyberspace, where he can leave behind what remains of his pathetic, physical shell. Born from an abnormal womb, his body is monstrous, an abject casing of gangrenous flesh and piercing cables, propped up by a rusting frame of steel. In abandoning the site of his creation, 'Iron Man' attempts to sever all ties with the monstrous feminine body, particularly his connections to the natural world of physical process. His new identity is a model of a cyber-dream; a form created from the moulding of two male participants into a single identity, with the female body reduced to the biological function of gestation within this process. 'Iron Man' is only free when he repels the archaic mother and leaves his physical shell, removing the threat of assimilation back into the archaic motherbody. In doing so, he releases himself from the abjection associated with his birth, and the monstrous body that encased him. His only salvation is an existence that rejects the physical, all its blood and tissue, veins and afterbirth.

Creed defines the association of woman with the visceral and the womb as another way of representing the monstrous feminine, via abjection. Her writing is based on Kristeva's expansive definition, abjection is "that which does not respect borders, positions, rules", and that which "disturbs identity, system, order."¹⁹ The abject is also "the place where meaning collapses, the place where 'I' am not."²⁰ The womb is placed as abject due to its links to a lack of identity, the foetal state, where a definition of the self cannot exist. The womb

19. Creed (1993), p. 8.

20. Creed (1993), p. 8.

is perceived as a formless, liquid organ, a fluid place which can create or terminate life. If gestation is a success, then birth is a process where we cross a border, from inside the motherbody to outside and the world we inhabit, a solid physical space.

This process, pregnancy and birth, involves specifically feminine fluids; menstrual blood, afterbirth, embryonic fluid. Abjection is the terrifying nature of these processes normally contained (within the body) erupting forth to threaten us with its evidence of our mortality and 'the fragility of the symbolic order'.²¹ According to Creed, the genres of science-fiction and horror present the monstrous feminine by associating the body with the dissipation of boundaries and the natural order. 'Iron Man', in some respects, is a figure of abjection because he is formed from the disintegration of two distinct identities, this assimilation into one enacted within the womb of the archaic mother. He threatens to disrupt order by crossing the boundaries of the monstrous womb into normal society; however, this time he chooses to flee to the fleshless safety of cyberspace.

The confounding of patriarchal structures by the abjection of the feminine body is an obvious anxiety within cyberpunk. Another generic medium which provides a variety of representations of woman as abject/monstrous womb is the genre of Japanese animation known as '*Manga*' or 'anime'. Although the *Manga* has generated some interest in the West this decade, to my knowledge little has been written to address the genre's motivations for visualising the female body as monstrous. It is timely, therefore, to consider this aspect of anime, particularly considering its negative portrayal of the biological difference

21. Creed (1993), p. 47.

of woman.

Animation and comics hold an esteemed position in Japanese society unrivalled in the West. Their influence on popular culture is extensive. The first *Manga* appeared in the twelfth century - a work by Buddhist monk Bishop Toba entitled *Chojugiga* or 'Animal Scrolls'. Since then it has become a Japanese cult-icon that has grown to phenomenal proportions. All markets are catered for, from comics for teenage girls across the board to X-rated, highly violent and aggressive tales targeted at the salaryman whom, it is often pointed out by Western observers, can be seen unashamedly consuming the bizarre and deviant concoctions on the morning train.

The phrase *Manga* is made up of two ideograms, *man* meaning 'in spite of one-self' and *ga* meaning 'picture'. However the ideogram *man* can also mean 'morally corrupt', so this is the most likely source of the translation that is currently favoured, 'irresponsible cartoon'.²² During the Sixties Japanese comics developed into a number of animated television series, Osamu Tezuka's *Kimba the White Lion* and *Astro Boy* being amongst the earliest successes (1963). Consequently Manga has become a successful industry, producing a myriad of animated titles in the last twenty years for cinema, television and video release. Recently the genre has become a visible presence in the video stores of Australia. It is the animated mediums of Manga that are considered in this project.

Manga's visual style is associated with an "aestheticised affinity with the

22. *'Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics'*, Frederick L. Schodt, Kodansha International Ltd USA, Harper & Row Publishers Inc, New York, 1984, p. 94.

apocalypse ...Japanese cyberpunk is deeply infused with nostalgic allusions and dominated by neurotic references to the past."²³ Certainly there is an element to anime that is uniquely Japanese, the narrative often structured within a post-apocalyptic wasteland that is a testimony to the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The apocalypse imbues the *Manga* with a type of abjection. In the genre, different worlds constantly threaten to collapse on each other, the danger of the environment centred on whether the future will arrive or collapse into a nightmarish past. In *Wicked City*, for example, it is difficult to locate the action despite the narrator declaring that it is Tokyo somewhere in the near future. Tokyo is disturbed by the arrival of another dimension, complete with demonic inhabitants and a new social order. The terror of the movie lies not only in the monstrous denizens of this new world crossing into the human domain, but also in the danger of this world assimilating the ordered structure of Tokyo's society. In this respect the stylised landscape of the *Manga* can be linked to the archaic mother, a world of unnatural order threatening to consume its inhabitants in a claustrophobic, encompassing embrace.

However despite all its generic Japanese characteristics, *Manga* is a genre which also visualises representations of the female form that can be found in Western cyberpunk texts, particularly the feminine body as a signifier of abjection. One of the strategies of presenting the monstrous feminine in the *Manga* lies in the manipulation of boundaries that separate human from animal. Woman, due to her association with procreation and the 'natural' cycle of birth, life and death, is often configured as horrifying by blending the normal female form with that of a beast. In *Ninja Scroll* we are confronted by a woman who,

23. 'Metallic K.O.', article by Krystian Woznicki for *World Art*, issue 1, 1996, p. 15.

when grabbed by a male protagonist, sheds her human skin and dissolves into a bundle of snakes. Again, in *Wicked City* the male hero has his evening brought to a horrifying end when his date morphs into a spider, climbing up the walls and threatening him with her vagina of steel. A proportionately high part of the structure of anime is devoted to the abject horror of boundaries collapsing, of natural becoming unnatural, of one way of life consuming another, of human joining with beast.

One of the most outstanding contributors of the genre, a four-part, as yet unfinished series entitled *3 x 3 Eyes* is worth examining in order to further unravel anime's visualisation of the abject, female body. The central figure of *3 x 3 Eyes* is a female character named Pai. Pai is a complex example of how Japanese cyberpunk negatively frames the feminine. As the last of her species, an ancient race of immortals known as the *Sanjiyan Unkara*, or 'Triclops', Pai is barren. She cannot reproduce with her own kind, instead intending on ending her three hundred year existence by 'becoming human' and therefore mortal. Consequently Pai is distinguished as non-human from the outset. However the horror lies in the manifestation of the powers her alien body possesses, the monstrous aspects of her nature visualised in a number of ways.

Pai cannot reproduce naturally - instead she gives the 'Gift of the Void', stealing men's souls and absorbing them into her own. Creation for Pai lies in the assimilation of present identities, not the construction of the new, and in itself this act can horrify. When Pai bestows 'the Gift' upon Yakumo Fujii, a male friend who is killed by her pet bird/demon Takouhi, a tattoo appears on his forehead representing the 'Sign of the Void'. Those who recognise the symbol recoil in horror, regarding his immortality as a curse, trapping him forever in a mortal body. Pai is construed as a monstrous figure because she consumes the

self, the ego, reducing the human to a physical shell. 'The Gift of the Void' renders the body redundant, a corpse divested of psychical support, a reminder of abjection based on the belief that a body without a mind is a body without purpose. Pai disrupts boundaries by confusing identity; this is further compounded by the binary structure of her character.

For Pai is not an obvious monster. Her identity is structured in two separate, distinct components, a dichotomy of form. At one level Pai is innocent, almost childlike, her main concern finding a statue she needs to become human (via an occult ritual), and whether she can make friends in Tokyo! But when Pai is threatened or stressed, or an obstacle to her quest appears, her personality dramatically alters. A third eye opens on her forehead, revealing the form of the *Sanjiyan Unkara*, which she carries within but is not aware of once its power has subsided. The change of personalities is fluid, seamless, abject. The Triclops is a mighty, ancient identity from a mythical time outside of the patriarchal order. She is both a creator of form (the Gift of the Void) and destroyer; Pai is able to cast spells that rip her opponent to pieces, without her physical contact. When the threat has subsided her aggressive side disappears, leaving the normal personality disoriented and confused by the chaos around her. Pai's ancient power, its origins outside of the patriarchal order, is contained *within* her body.

The construction of Pai's character on two different levels reveals a great deal concerning the presentation of the monstrous feminine within anime. Firstly, it configures a form linked to the disruption of boundaries, the terror of the ancient power within Pai residing in the uncertainty of when it will appear, crossing into this world and bringing destruction upon those who intersect her path. Secondly, Pai is barren and must embark upon a unnatural path in order to

generate more of her species. The road she travels to do this is fraught with violence and danger, a warning, perhaps, that self-generation is an undesirable, perverted goal.

Finally, when Pai is in her child-like state she is presented as a likeable, normal young woman. She is unaware of her other personality. The Triclops, however, is aware of her, and manifests like a monstrous, protective mother when Pai is in danger. Due to the association of the female form with birth and mothering, the raging power of the Triclops is configured as emanating from an ancient matriarchal 'natural' order. When Pai swallows Yakumo's soul in order to restore his life, he becomes a reminder of what is seen as monstrous about birth. Within the narrative, as he is now immortal, Yakumo is killed a number of times, the manner of his death invariably involving the explosion of blood and organs from inside his body. By continually framing Yakumo as a corpse, a body without an ego displaying its internal structure, the narrative constantly refers back to Pai and her monstrous, consuming womb as the source of his pitiful, abject existence.

3 x 3 Eyes is in no way an exception to the rule; the world of anime abounds with terrifying females and monstrous wombs. In *Battle Angel Alita* a broken female cyborg is picked up as scrap and restored by a male scientist. The cyborg, Alita, is revealed to be capable of mysterious powers no other cyborgs possess; obstructive, violent powers that emanate from within the remaining parts of her human, female body. *Urotsukidoji 3: Legend of the Demon Womb* sees Alektor, a female android built by her 'father' to replace his dead daughter, falling pregnant to a demon and giving birth to a mutant baby(!). The baby is the controller of unnatural powers which threaten to destroy the fabric of Alektor's fathers' society. These examples, and many others, are a visualised

response to the obviously unsettling sexual and biological difference of the female form. Manga animation consistently frames the feminine body as a negative force and in this respect is a further example of cyberpunk's anti-woman polemic.

The issue of the monstrous feminine is also of concern to a number of contemporary feminist artists. Author Carol Ockman writes,

"It is part of a strong tradition of feminist work, both visual and theoretical, that suggests ways in which the disgusting actually can be empowering for women. (These works) acknowledge the troublesome relationship between female spectatorship and pleasure, and then confront head on the association of female sexuality and the monstrous body."²⁴

Ockman is referring to the work of Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith, examining their use of abjection to "parody ...the dominant patriarchal imagery."²⁵ It is the latter artist who is of interest to this project.

Smith's work is centred on the boundaries defined by the human body, and the abject nature ascribed to the body by the transgression of biological material from one place to another. Her sculptures present internal structures, removed from their environment, externalised and objectified. 'Womb' (1986) consists of a bronze, womb-like structure lying on a plinth, like a relic from a museum. It paradoxically has the appearance of an urn, a water vessel, but not a womb. Smith's use of hard materials to confound the abject is of interest to my work. 'Womb' is made of metal, a material alien to the natural body; ungiving, textured, cold. From the narrow opening of the uterus, we can see that the vessel

24. Ockman (1995), p. 129

25. Ockman (1995), p. 127

is unoccupied. Ockman writes of her work,

"The fact that there is nothing inside - the piece can be opened - thwarts expectation about containment and situates 'Womb' squarely within the context of recent debates about abortion."²⁶

'The Tale' (1992) is another work of Smith's that presents one of her 'hard/soft combinations'²⁷, a female composed of wax, pigment and papier mache, prostrate on her hands and knees. A long, dark mass protrudes from her bottom, a mystery in itself -- is it a line of faeces, or an umbilical cord, trailing behind the pitiful figure as she seems to try and crawl away? 'The Tale' presents a monstrous figure, a female form that has 'lost control' of its biological functions. By openly displaying the abject nature of the body, Smith forces the viewer to experience, physically *and* mentally, the presence of natural biological material that is considered taboo. 'The Tale' is a confronting piece, the viewer standing above the kneeling woman, who reveals her abjection in an almost indifferent way. She neither acknowledges the extrusion nor attempts to remove it; it is a part of her body, a body which is *defined* by associations with the very same waste product. 'The Tale' utilises the monstrous feminine to visualise the implications of disassociating the body from the formation of subjective identity. As an objectified form, it is one that can be attacked for performing its own functions, processes that remind us of our origins and ultimate end.

Within cyberculture, the body is a figure that is ridiculed, manipulated and coerced. Its polemic regards biological structure as a weakness, a site that is no longer able to withstand the by-products and repercussions of twentieth century desire, a redundant form to be rebuilt or replaced. Cyber-dreams are not

26. Ockman, p. 138

27. Ockman, p. 140

a-historical; they are a continuation of the drive to increase power and deny death that has fixated Western culture from the beginnings of scientific discovery. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz cites Freud, when in 1929 he wrote,

"With every tool (man) is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning. Motor power places gigantic forces at his disposal, which, like his muscles, he can employ in any direction ...Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent, but these organs have not grown onto him, & they still give him trouble at times." ²⁸

Cyberculture continues this embrace of technology, only now the prosthetics are not simply 'auxiliary organs' but devices that penetrate the internal space of the body. It is impossible not to consider cybercultures' visualisation of both types of body modification without including the work of the Australian artist Stelarc, especially given that his work and ideas predate contemporary cyberpunk by at least ten years.

In the early Seventies Stelarc wrote, "to exist means sure death - unless we can reprogram our genetic structure."²⁹ At that time the artist began what was to become an original and innovative career in demonstrating, via sculpture, the bodies' obsolescence. Stelarc's work during this early period involved the insertion of various probes into the body, the artist then video-taping his internal image. This project initiated Stelarc's use of his body as both a tool and the site of his art. In 1975 Stelarc continued investigations into his objective physical structure through a series of performances entitled 'Obsolete Body

28. Grosz (citing Freud, 1994) p. 39.

29. Stelarc, *Obsolete Body Suspensions*, compiled and edited by Stelarc & James D. Paffraih, JP Publications, California, 1984, p. 8.

Suspensions'. Culminating over a decade later, the 'Obsolete Body' examined the condition of the body as it exists in space, Stelarc suspending himself from hooks pierced through his flesh, the surface of the skin transformed into a bizarre, biological landscape by the weight of the artist's body and gravitational pull, stretching the skin to the limits. The suspensions are almost abject, the horror and the tension of the act residing in the triangular form of the contorted skin and the intersection of the hook, threatening to tear through the flesh and release the body back into the space to which it belongs, the solid, physical ground. Stelarc states,

"Off the earth, the bodys' complexity, softness and wetness would be difficult to sustain. The strategy should be to HOLLOW, HARDEN and DEHYDRATE the body to make it more durable, less vulnerable, and more operationally efficient."³⁰

Stelarc's suspensions are expressions of his concept of the body as a hollow place, a form incapable of participating in subjective identity. They are almost the antithesis of the work produced by artists like Kiki Smith, the masculine body defined as a malleable, controllable force as opposed to the wild, abject display of Smith's sculptures.

In 'Event For Support Structure' (1979) Stelarc sewed shut his eyes and mouth then suspended himself between two planks for a period of seventy-five hours. In describing the work, Stelarc distinctly separates his mental response from the physical, "...the body was pacified, but the mind was restless. The body was unplugged from the planks after three days."³¹ Here the body is conceptualised as a separate part of the self. Stelarc's suspensions continually challenged not so much the physiological limitations of the body, but the

30. Stelarc, 'Cyber Strategies and the Virtual Arm Project', for Loeffler/Anderson (1994), p. 186.

31. Stelarc/ Paffrath (1984), p. 59

ability of the mind to control it, to force the artist's form to accept and endure the strains of his psychological experiments. The suspension performances pitted mind against body, both its surface and interior. Their generic title, 'Obsolete Bodies', suggest the mind was victorious.

The battle won, Stelarc's later work, the 'Virtual Third Arm', aimed to experiment with the possibility of increasing physical capability by the addition of external prosthetics. In a series of performances that are yet to culminate, Stelarc manoeuvres a third arm, a virtual limb which he describes as "a computer-generated humanlike manipulator",³² through a variety of interactions with objects, tasks, himself and the audience. Visually, the artificial limb is pure cyberpunk; shining steel, wires, cables attached to the surface of the body. It is here, however, that fact and fiction collide. The third arm, unlike the cyborgs of cyberfiction, is completely *external* to the bodies' structure. Stelarc writes,

"Amputees often experience a phantom limb. It is now possible to have the phantom sensation of an additional arm - a virtual arm - albeit visual rather than visceral."³³

Even though Stelarc cannot feel his third arm, it is considered a part of his body because he can *see it* respond to his commands. It is an extension of his objective body, the power of its enhanced function prioritised over psychical response. But the incidence of the phantom limb and its 'visceral' qualities suggests that visualisation is only a component in the formulation of physical identity. The existence of real pain in an absent limb indicates the possibility that somehow, the body is capable of subjective experience, or at least a physical

32. Loeffler/ Anderson (1994) p.188.

33. Loeffler/Anderson (1994) p.186

identity that is stored in our memory. The third arm cannot feel due to its nature as an object - a reminder of Freud and its 'auxiliary organs', that sometimes resist the desires of man, and still 'give him trouble at times.'³⁴

In other projects, and perhaps in response to the frustrations experienced with the virtual arm, Stelarc pursues control of the objective body by returning to his interior, the original site of his work. 'Involuntary Body/ Third Hand' involves Stelarc directly interacting with a 'stimulation system', a device which can stimulate and control various muscles of the body. Via a touch-screen interface on the Internet (which includes a diagram of Stelarc's 'cyborg' body) the participant is able to manipulate six different muscles of the artist from a considerable geographical distance. In order for the piece to work, Stelarc must be 'wired up' to the 'stimulation system', the device which manipulates the various muscles (e.g. calf, biceps, etc.) at the response of the controller logged into the web site. In many respects 'Involuntary Body' is one of the first enactments of the cyberpunk desire to live as psychical beings. Stelarc frames his physical shape as an obsolete force, a formless sac synthesised by the intersection of the screen, emphasising the actual distance between 'controlled' and 'controller'. Physical identity is irrelevant to the project. The body is placed at the disposal of the shapeless denizens of cyberspace, the lack of contact between the participants emphasising the redundancy of meaningful physical interaction in the formation of the cyber community. Ironically, the theme of body manipulation and control from a distance is a staple of science fiction and horror genres, which often present the objectified body as a site for the abuse of power. Yet, there is a more positive aspect to Stelarc's 'Involuntary Body' - I am reminded of recent innovations in medical research, whereby a skilled

34. Grosz (1994) p. 39.

surgeon may demonstrate a difficult operation, live via satellite, or cyberspace, to a classroom on the other side of the geographical globe. Or current military excursions into the possibility of a doctor being able to treat a wounded soldier in a battle zone, without physically entering the dangerous area.

Yet, confined to the two-dimensional limitations of the screen, the work matches its definite title, the *Involuntary Body*. It is difficult to regard the work as anything other than an experiment in manipulation, the reinforcement of a dualist position that situates mind over body. Visually, Stelarc's 'involuntary' performances lack the tension of his suspensions, the skin no longer a malleable surface but a hard, indifferent screen, encasing a hollow body devoid of its own response.

'Stomach Sculpture', created for the Melbourne Sculpture Triennial in 1993, presents the internalised image of Stelarc's stomach as evidence of the artist's belief in the absence of physical identity. His body again becomes the sculptors' material and the site of the work, which contains noticeable elements of cyberhype in its dialogue. Stelarc writes,

"The notion of a hollow body is seductive as it would become a better host for all the technical components that could be packed into it..."³⁵

The evidence of the hollow body lies in the microfilm image of the inside of Stelarc's stomach, literally configured as a cavity, a space, an absence. The image is retrieved via the artist swallowing a large pod which, when inside the stomach, opens to an incredible size of fifty by seventy-five millimetres, allowing a micro-camera to record the interior landscape of the body. The ingestion of the steel-enclosed camera is reminiscent of the abject terror of the

35. Loeffler/ Anderson (1994) p. 186

suspension works. The sheer size of the pod outside of the body conjures an uneasy curiosity. There exists the possibility that the camera may become fixed inside the artists' stomach, a synthetic, internal intrusion, monitoring the body's functions in a bizarre twist on Orwell's notion, 'Big Brother is watching you!'

Stelarc utilises the micro-film image to demonstrate that the body is the site for nothing other than physical response. Within the confines of our interior, 'empty' spaces could become the location for synthetic, power-driven intrusion,

"The cyberbody is not a subject, but an object - not an object of desire but an object for designing. It is no longer meaningful to see the body as a site for the psyche. See the body rather as a structure."³⁶

It is possible for Stelarc to take this stance not only because his thoughts are dualist in their construction, but also inherently masculine. Stelarc's work is firmly entrenched in cyberpunk, which embraces and promotes the drive to regard the body as a site open to control, closed to identity. This ultimately translates to a vision that excludes the possibility of a different body perception; for women, *it is* still meaningful to view the biological form as a psychical location.

If Stelarc lived in a feminine form, he could implant his camera in a different spot - the womb. Reproduction biologically locates the womb as a site for a form of consciousness. The foetus, 'the full body', cannot be disassociated from the support of the motherbody, and in this sense it is impossible to define the feminine form as a permanently hollow vessel. The presence of the womb literally ensures that the female body (nearly) always carries the *potential* to create and sustain a psyche, and that potential is a crucial and unavoidable component in the formulation of feminine identity.

36. Loeffler/Anderson (1994) p. 186

Because the inherent drive of cyberpunk is to render the body obsolete in our lived consciousness, it is logical to conclude that the female body, with its capacity for creation, is viewed as a potential obstacle. Certainly, a large proportion of cyber-visual dialogue suggests that this is the case. The cyberpunk future is one of synthesised beings, of controlled bodies and obsolete physical subjectivity. Symbolic order presides over natural. Consequently the female form is consistently visualised as a negative force, a monstrous, destructive power which is, like 'mother nature', beyond control. Cyber visualisations are an attempt to undermine the strengths of feminine biological difference, by configuring generative power as the threat of extinction.

'Beyond Flesh' exemplifies my desire to reinstate and raise the profile of the feminine body in cybergenres. It is a subjective response to part of my physical identity that, for the first time, demands attention. In my late twenties, as a single, childless woman, a subtle (but literally experienced) shift has occurred in my position within patriarchal society. In choosing to delay my reproductive capacity, I have consciously and openly exercised my control over generative power. This has led me to speculate again, from a different perspective, upon how biological function, the abject body, and contemporary culture define the physical. In examining mediums with which I have experienced a long love/hate relationship,³⁷ I have discovered that recent years have seen a frenetic increase in the objectification of the body. Reproductive control has once again become a contentious issue, manifesting in anxious visualisations which suddenly appear to me to be exclusive, two-dimensional and ultimately indifferent to my gaze.

37. An encounter with 'Dr. Who' at about the age of five triggered a lifelong interest in fantasy genres. While I love their visual output, the mediums are consistently irritating in their ignorance of the female gaze. 33

Deconstructionist cultural critic Avital Ronnel writes,

" The promise of science fiction is that it does try to invent the future in a way that very few other modes of articulation are capable of doing."³⁸

If genres of future fiction aspire to represent what is to come, then contemporary examples of this future deliver an auspicious fate. Given the current climate of radical speculation based upon recent discoveries in the field of biological and synthetic generation, it would be interesting to monitor the metamorphosis of future body aspirations, as science fiction becomes fact.

Recent contributions to the fantasy genre are already indicating a change in polemic. Ironically it is the latest instalment in the *Alien* group of movies,³⁹ *Alien Resurrection* (1997), directed by Luc Besson, which allows a glimpse into our fictional future. Both the lead female characters are synthetic life forms; Sigourney Weavers' Lieutenant Ripley is now an eighth generation clone, Winona Ryder an android terrorist. Ripley is cloned so that her womb can be used to nurture an Alien queen, constructed from cloning a hybrid of Alien and Ripley's own D.N.A. The opening sequence is brutal, the Alien ripped from Ripley's stomach by caesarian, the doctor then asking his superior, "can I keep her?" He is, of course, referring to Ripley.

The most subtle, yet important, indication of a change in fictional desires, however, lies in the starship's computer which in the first three instalments is known as 'mother'. *Alien Resurrection* by contrast names the motherbody of the ship 'father'. This may suggest that generative power in the future will

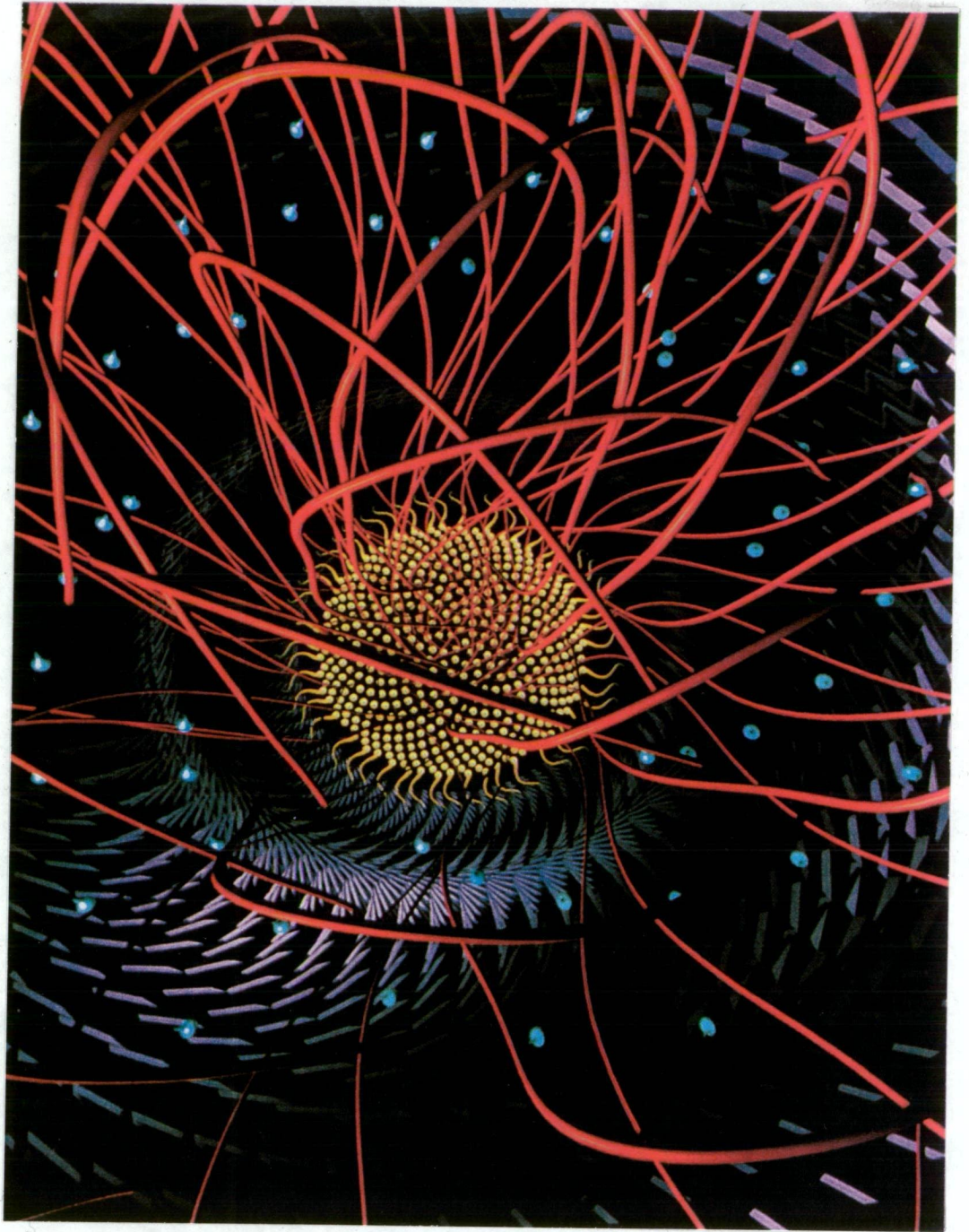
38. 'Deconstruction', article by Avital Ronnel for *Mondo 2000*, (1993), p.80.

39. Ironic, because Barbara Creed has written extensively on the first three *Alien* movies (directed by Ridley Scott), particularly their construction of motherhood. For an example, see Creed (1994) pp. 16-30.

reside in the masculine body. I would not find this discomfoting if my identity was not confined by the genres to biological structure. As one of the film's characters remarks, in a scene where Ripley maniacally burns the remains of the first seven attempts at her clone: "It must be a chick thing". 'Beyond Flesh' demonstrates that it most certainly is.

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1. Jon McCormack, *TURBULENCE* (detail) 1995, CD-ROM.



2. Patricia Piccinini, 'YOUR TIME STARTS NOW...' (1997),
C-Type digital photograph.



3. THE BORG inside the motherbody of their starship
(*First Contact*, 1997), director Jonothan Frakes.



4. Shinya Tsukamoto's *IRON MAN*
(left) 'the fetishist' and 'the salaryman'.



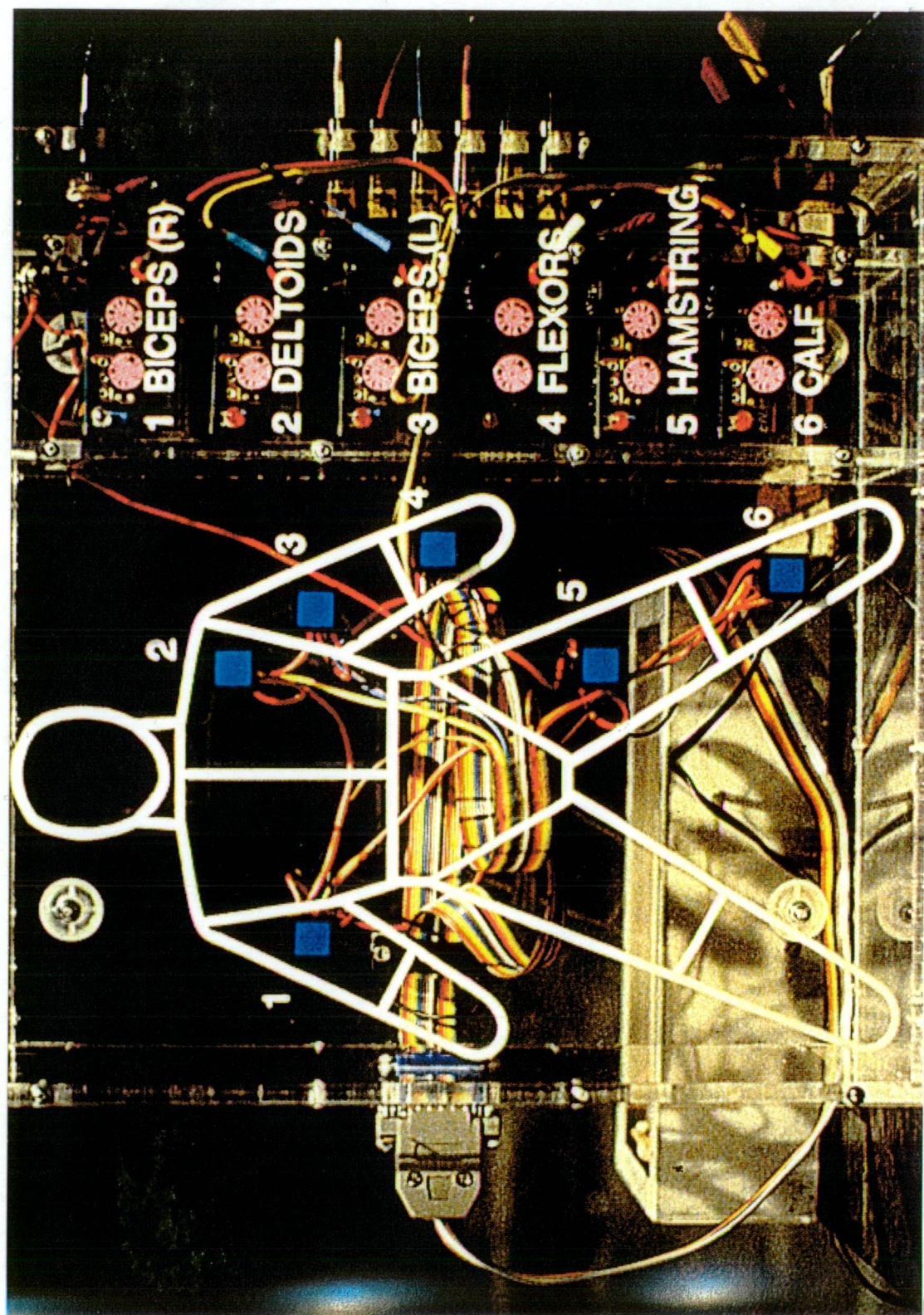
5. Promotional poster for *WICKED CITY*
(Manga video, 1993, dir. Yoshiaki Kawajiri).



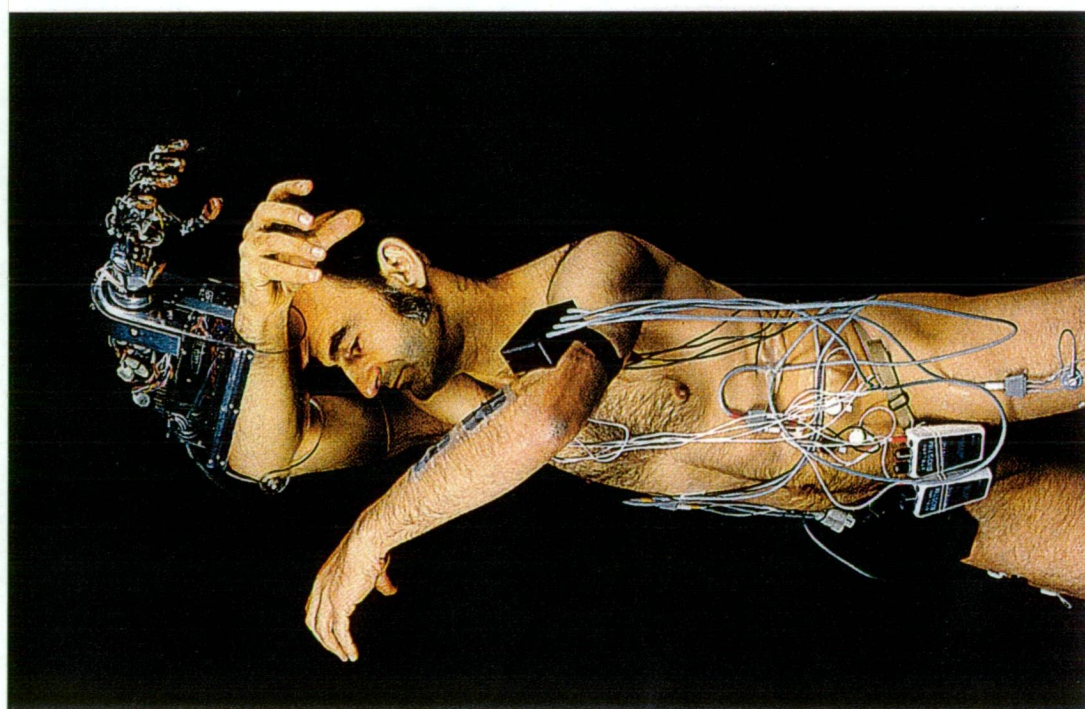
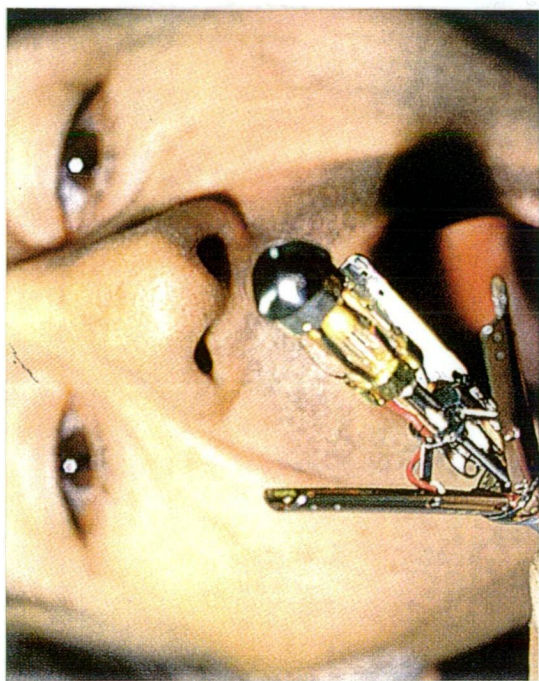
6. Promotional poster for *3 x 3 EYES* (Manga video, 1992, dir. Daisuke Nishio) illustrating the two personalities of Pai.



7. Kiki Smith, *THE TALE* (1992), wax, pigment and papier mache, 58.4 x 58.4 x 406.4 cm



8. Stelarc, *STIMULATION SYSTEM*



9. Stelarc (left), *VIRTUAL THIRD ARM* and *STOMACH SCULPTURE* (1993), microfilm image.