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Published in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXVII (2003), pp.88-114

Self-Mutilation, Interpretation, and Controversial Art¹

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Offended reactions to art are not easily subjected to philosophical analysis; they are generally inarticulate in all but their outrage. But such offended reactions are too widespread to be easily dismissed. I will try to articulate what might lie behind such reactions, to understand this moral outrage and see if there is anything we might say in its defense. That can only be done effectively by exploring specific instances. After a more general survey I will therefore focus on one work: the case of the performance artist Stelarc and his 1984 performance *Street Suspension*.

Stelarc's work, which involves self-mutilation, offers a key to understanding how a work of art might seem demeaning to a viewer. I will explore the notion of demeaning treatment closely in relation to Stelarc, and will approach his work in the context of performance and dance history.² By way of this discussion of Stelarc I will show how even seemingly direct and immediate "gut" reactions presuppose artistic interpretation, and how interpretation is presupposed in such reactions.

I. Art as transparently offensive

There are times when people think art needs no interpretation. When Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* came to the attention of the U.S. Senate in 1989 it sparked such intense, inarticulate, and immediate reactions that even members of the art world were shocked by this ironic reconfirmation of the emotional power of art. "This so-

called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity," said Senator Alfonse D'Amato before he ripped up a catalogue reproduction of the work for dramatic punctuation.irate about the National Endowment for the Arts' supposed funding of the work, D'Amato complained further:

Well, if you want free speech, you want to draw dirty pictures, you want to do anything you want, that is your business, but not with taxpayers' money. This is an outrage, and our people's tax dollars should not support this trash, and we should not be giving it the dignity. And after this piece of trash and this artist received this award, to make matters worse, the Awards in Visual Arts, this wonderful publication was put together; and who was it financed by, partially? By none other than the National Endowment for the Arts. What a disgrace.³

Senator Jesse Helms caught the ball running. "Mr. President, the Senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation and in his description of the blasphemy of the so-called artwork. I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk." But once was not enough. "I say again, Mr. President, he is not an artist. He is a jerk... That is all right for him to be a jerk but let him be a jerk on his own time and with his own resources. Do not dishonor our Lord."⁴ Within minutes twenty-one senators joined them in signing a letter to the NEA, expressing their outrage and asking for reform of the Endowment's grant procedures.⁵

Interestingly, these senators didn't feel the need to discuss or study Serrano's photograph any further, not to mention to know anything about the context established by his other work, in order to act. They saw the photograph as interpretatively transparent and found moral outrage the obvious and only appropriate reaction. This and similar indignation over the homoerotic photographs in Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition *Robert*

Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment were only the beginning of a wave of fury.⁶ What we see in these public statements and actions is not in fact social disagreement over the quality of works of art. The sentence, "This so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity," does not function for D'Amato as an evaluation of aesthetic merit. Nor are people immersed in philosophical worries about the nature of art and raising genuine doubts about the limits of the concept. "I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk," is not a philosophical claim about the ostension of "artist" or "art". Even Senator John Danforth begins his statement of *opposition* to the Helms Amendment⁷ by saying of the works of art, "These are gross. These are terrible. These are totally indefensible."⁸

These are reactions of offense, plain and simple. Some of these also are or advocate drastic action. Protesters outside of movie theaters across the U.S. picketed the opening of Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. Under cover of night the government dismantled and removed Richard Serra's sculpture *Tilted Arc* from Federal Plaza in New York City in response to long-term public resentment of the sculpture. During his site specific work *Street Suspension*, the performance artist Stelarc was stopped by police and charged with disorderly conduct. Annie Sprinkle's 1990 performance of *Post-Porn Modernist* sent Dana Rohrbacher of the House of Representatives and Christian groups like the American Family Association into a letter writing frenzy. And even philosophers have been driven to action; Douglas Stalker and Clark Glymour present a philistine manifesto against the existence of public sculpture in which they compare the harmful effect of public sculpture on the populace to that of tobacco.⁹

So why do people get so fired up about art? The above protests include ostensible reasons for outrage, but those are not obviously satisfactory. It's not just anxiety about the spending of their tax dollars. An understatedly snide article reporting on a recent conference at SUNY New Paltz ran under the header "School for Scandal." (*The Daily*

News, November, 1997). Yet the conference, "Subject to Desire: Refiguring the Body," which involved performance art, body art, and sexually explicit visual art, was paid for by an anonymous donor. Another reason given is that such negative reactions are based on the belief that works of art set bad examples and are therefore dangerous. The strain of contemporary performance art that involves bodily self-mutilation should provide a touchstone for this possibility. William Scarbrough hung naked from ropes tied around his ankles, arms folded across his chest for forty-five minutes until gallery viewers cut him down. Chris Burden had himself crucified to a Volkswagen in one work, shot in the arm in another, and tied up in a burlap sack and left on a California highway in a third, and Ron Athey inserted some twenty hypodermic needles into his arm and repeatedly punctured his forehead with a thin knitting needle. And finally, Stelarc is an Australian performance artist who hung himself over an intersection in the East Village from eighteen fish hooks that pierced his skin until police ended the event.

Detractors of such art might claim that it sets a bad example and thus induces people to mimic what they see to the extent that they mutilate themselves or others. This charge would parallel Plato's attack on poetry in the *Republic*, and many currently use similar arguments against pornography,¹⁰ and television.¹¹ But what kind of bad example is set by *Tilted Arc*?¹² And furthermore, even if this explains why people find certain works threatening or dangerous, it still doesn't explain their gut reactions of offense.

We see in these reactions, even under the even-handed nonchalant style of Stalker and Glymour, a kind of basic incomprehension in the face of the artworks they criticize. So a deeper reason, even if not explicit or avowed, for hostility could come from a feeling of not understanding, a loss of one's bearings in the landscape of the artwork. People just don't know what to make of a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, or a giant steel wall obstructing their path to work, and they certainly don't understand why they should call these things art. Many assume that art deals in beauty. In a statement to the Senate, Senator Slade Gordon went so far as to enlist Benedetto Croce in the war on art.

"But this, what he called 'the theory of art as supporting theses,' " said Gordon, "he rejected, for he believed that 'Aesthetic consideration... pays attention always and only to the adequateness of expression, that is to say, to beauty.' "13 Given such a view one could feel shortchanged when not finding beauty in art, and at a loss to imagine what else art might be about. Further, we might see their negative reactions to certain works as driven by fear of things that are somehow threatening-- sex, homosexuality, AIDS, poverty, violence, the body-- as performance artist Karen Finley suggests in her story "It's Only Art."¹⁴

Over Mapplethorpe and Serrano, there was much talk about demeaning and denigrating, dishonoring and debasing. But what is it about these works that gets people to feel demeaned and denigrated? What accounts for this reaction? The detractors of such controversial works seem to think it's obvious, that their reactions are self-evident and their moral judgements about the works uncontroversial. But it's not obvious. Clearly they don't feel offended or demeaned just because someone disagrees with them. People disagree with them all the time; senators should be used to that. And interestingly, people often have similar reactions to examples of body art that don't seem to be propounding any straightforward theses with which they agree or disagree.

Before we can take up Stelarc's work directly we have to know what it would be for it to demean its viewers. That will require an answer to two prior questions: what it is to demean someone or oneself, and following upon that whether or when self-mutilation is demeaning.

II. What Is It for Something to Be Demeaning?

1. Humiliation and Demeaning Treatment

Since demeaning treatment and being demeaned seem related to being humiliated

we can begin by turning to Gabriele Taylor's explication of emotions of self-assessment. Its crucial feature is her postulation of a kind of scale relative to which people may be positioned. "This characterization assumes a system by reference to which high and low positions can be defined," she says; "The most obvious example is a hierarchical social system, like the feudal system of the Middle Ages."¹⁵ She then claims that emotions of self-assessment arise in virtue of a person's movement on the scale, his perception of his place on the scale and his judgement about what place on the scale he should occupy or has occupied.

Humiliation, on Taylor's view, arises in virtue of a downward move on the scale, a move that shows others that the person does not in fact occupy the position of which he had previously been thought worthy, or of which he had thought himself worthy. Humiliating treatment is, quite colloquially, a "put-down", an act that says a person is not worthy of the respect she thought she deserved. But Taylor makes a distinction between humiliation or humiliating treatment, and being humiliated. Someone might accept the downward move, accept her new position as a reliable pronouncement of her worth, and thus be humbled. Or she can *feel* humiliated by the humiliating downward move: "Feeling humiliated..." says Taylor, "does not imply the agent's acceptance of the new situation; his own view of himself and what is due to him may not change at all. But whether it does or not, he is aware that in the eyes of the world less is now due to him than was assumed or was formerly the case, and aware that to the eyes of the world he has been shown to have suffered from exaggerated self-esteem." (ibid. p.19).

Some qualifications are clearly needed. It does not seem that simply being aware that he has been put in a lower place or shown up in front of others makes a person feel humiliated. Rather, it requires also that the agent's view of himself does *not* change accordingly, that he does not accept the new negative pronouncement about himself. If he did, he might feel shame, remorse, inferiority, or various other emotions distinct from humiliation. Humiliation seems necessarily to involve a divergence in the agent's

placement of herself on the scale and a social or otherwise external placement of her. But although, as Taylor suggests, she can become aware of this divergence through an external downward move-- a lowering of success in whatever area she deems important (the basis for her scale)-- an external downward move should not be necessary for such a divergence of opinion to exist.

But there are various problems with Taylor's notion of a scale or system with regard to which people are placed. Where does such a scale exist? Is it a social construct embodied in institutions, etiquette, paychecks, fashion, etc.? Or is it something more personal, not dependent on the features of a particular society? Perhaps it is not necessary for there actually to exist such a socially constructed scale as a feudal system would provide for a person to have the sense of scale or relative position Taylor describes. A person may construct her own internal scale in virtue of what is important to her. But will a person who does not live in a feudal or caste system, or some other strongly hierarchical society be able to or inclined to construct such an internal scale? One might wonder if on Taylor's account people from differently organized societies do not experience the same emotions of self-assessment, or if she thinks they have all mysteriously internalized a British model of society.

Furthermore, to say that a person has a notion of a scale is perhaps to attribute more than is necessary. A person can make relative judgements of position, of better and worse, without having a full-blown scale or system for measurement. If people do have the sort of internalized scale Taylor suggests, it would seem to be very fuzzy, clear only in places that matter. But it does not even seem that I take anything like a fixed scale into account in making judgements about myself or in having emotions of self-assessment. I seem merely to make a local judgement about higher and lower such as: this treatment suggests I am lower than I now think myself to be. Suppose I have previously lived comfortably but somehow end up homeless and begging for money on the subway. I may eventually come to see being given a quarter by a stranger as not humiliating in

comparison with being given nothing at all, which *would* be humiliating. In like manner, if I move upwards on a scale, things which aren't humiliating in comparison with my earlier state could be seen as humiliating. If I am spoken to like a child I may be humiliated although when I was a child it wasn't humiliating to be spoken to like a child. This is all to say that when we feel emotions of self-assessment like humiliation we do not consider net movement on a scale, or even consider an entire scale. We simply compare our own local assessment of ourselves with that simultaneously made by others. Taylor's model facilitates such a description of what we do, but it also provides a lot of extra baggage.

Still, the model seems to provide a useful foundation for an explication of demeaning treatment. Demeaning treatment is the treatment of persons without the respect worthy of persons; to demean a person is to treat him or her as something less than a person. In Taylor's terminology this would be to place a person lower on the scale than we would normally place any person. Demeaning is not simply lowering, as Taylor says of humiliation. It is a kind of humiliating treatment: a special case of lowering or humiliation in which the person is lowered to the position of something less than a person. There is a discrepancy between the way the agent has previously been treated or thinks she should be treated, namely as a person, and the agent's actual treatment as something less.

What constitutes being treated *as a person* is extremely culturally and temporally specific. One culture might regard as treatment not worthy of a person what another regards as humane or respectful; thus, one will see certain acts as demeaning and the other won't. For example, genital mutilation has often been thought of as demeaning treatment of women by American commentators, but is it demeaning for the African societies that practice it?¹⁶

Even within a particular culture there will be debates over what constitutes treatment worthy of a person, i.e., what the standards for humane treatment actually are.

Such debates usually arise with regard to individual cases and perhaps each culture can answer the question ‘what constitutes treating someone *as a person*?’ only on a case by case basis. We cannot assume that explicit criteria are available for being treated as a person. There may simply be enough cases that enough people agree on to allow us to extrapolate.

There is presumably, in general, a large store of agreed upon cases. For instance, in this culture people usually recognize eating off a plate made of ceramic, plastic, metal, wood, or paper, and eating certain foods with their hands and others with various conventional utensils as treatment befitting persons. They are treated as persons when they are able to eat in this way. They would not, however, view eating food directly off the ground (with or without utensils) as treatment befitting persons (although it's not considered disrespectful of animals to make them eat in this way). People usually regard physical contact like hugs, handshakes, and pats on the shoulder as treatment befitting persons. Punches, scratches, and other forms of battery are usually not.

There are also borderline cases for which intuitions vary greatly. For example: is having expletives yelled at you on the street not being treated as a person? Is being pinched not being treated as a person? How do we extrapolate from the cases we agreed on to make decisions about these borderline cases?

So much, as we see with these examples, depends on context. Even when we agree, we usually agree that an act (like hugging) constitutes treating someone as a person *in that particular context*. Many people may agree that a mother hugging her child is treating the child as a person, but that a harrasing boss hugging his employee against her will is not treating her as a person. But what about a clinging and overprotective mother who hugs her child obsessively, manipulating the child with her affection and depriving it of freedom? Intuitions will probably vary. But this context dependence doesn't stand in the way of using the notion of treating someone like a person in a discussion about demeaning treatment.

In Taylor's terms, we could say that demeaning treatment lowers a person on his or her scale to *a place not befitting a person*--- a place the person has not occupied and does not believe he or she should occupy. But we should have some reservations. A person need not have previously occupied a place on the scale worthy of a person, or recognize that he or she *should* occupy such a place to be the object of demeaning treatment. Imagine a person who has been treated as less than a person her whole life (Truffaut's *The Wild Child* is based on such a case); she neither thinks she should be treated as a person nor has been treated as a person. We would, however, still want to say she is the object of demeaning treatment. Being the object of demeaning treatment is not just a question of self-assessment like the emotions of self-assessment that Taylor describes. Thus, we should only accept an adaptation of Taylor's theory insofar as it says demeaning treatment lowers a person to a place on the scale not befitting persons; demeaning treatment treats persons as less than persons.¹⁷

How can we further characterize demeaning treatment? Demeaning treatment is often violent. Here I have in mind not random violence (the violence of a tree limb that falls and coincidentally hits a person with great force) but violence that is abusive: treatment that harms people or intends to harm people in that it interferes with their projects and their ability to lead constructive lives. Such violent treatment need not be physical; it might equally be psychological. If I see a movie that leaves me feeling devastated, nihilistic, and paralyzed, that film has done a kind of violence against me. It has interfered with my pursuit of my projects (even if only temporarily), with my investing myself in things I have been invested in, with my ability to will, with my ability to grant value to certain things I have valued, and with my viewing seriously and positively the project of living. A movie, or event, which leaves me permanently like that does me greater violence than one that puts me in that state for only a couple of hours.

What constitutes violent treatment, treatment that does violence to a person, will vary, however, from one context to another. For example, dancing is not usually violent

or demeaning. But there is a story of a group of SS men who command a group of arrested Chasidic men to dance Chasidic dances for them. Their request (at gunpoint) is mocking, humiliating, and demeaning to the men who are forced to dance. There is nothing intrinsically demeaning about dancing and this dancing would not be physically violent or result in any physical harm, but being forced to do something joyous and religiously significant for the amusement of mocking, unsympathetic viewers is humiliating. It belittles something the men value (dancing in this way), and it treats them like puppets instead of people, tools for the sake of empty amusement. It is abusive to mock people, to make them perform rituals they value in an antagonistic setting, to render them helpless by threatening to kill them, and to treat them like dogs who are commanded to bark on cue. And so, in this case, dancing is demeaning.

2. The Role of Intention in Demeaning Treatment

We might wonder if demeaning treatment necessarily involves the intention to treat a person as less than a person. For example, we do not usually consider surgery demeaning since it is intended to help the person survive, function normally, or maintain the health of his or her body. We might, however, label as demeaning very similar actions performed with the intention of causing bodily harm, disfiguring a person, or torturing him. But it is not clear that we can generalize this. Firstly, the intention to help someone is not incompatible with treating him as less than a person. The pain, disfigurement, or dehumanization of a medical patient, if extreme enough, may lead us to wonder if he is treated as less than a person by the administration of the “treatment”. Is cutting open a barely surviving cancer patient yet again to do a minimally successful liver transplant treating him humanely and respectfully? Is scheduling a pregnant woman for a C-section because she might have difficulty in childbirth and her doctor wants to go out of town treating her as a person? It may be that in some cases surgery, chemotherapy, and other

medical procedures do not involve the intention to demean people, in fact involve intentions to help or protect people, but still end up demeaning them anyway.

If such medical treatments can be demeaning then the consent of the patient or victim does not save the act from being demeaning. Many other acts that we might consider demeaning also involve consent; for example, engaging in sado-masochistic acts, being a stripper, and wearing a cute little apron and hat as a waitress in Howard Johnson's all involve consent. Sometimes it is consent under extreme duress. The Chasidic men consent to dance under extreme duress; a woman might consent to act in a pornographic film, become a prostitute, or even to be raped under such duress.

Sometimes the consent is difficult to see; but consent or submission in some respect seems required. A person who dies a slow dehumanizing death of AIDS consents to that fate in the sense that he does not seek medical treatment or commit suicide. He consents in the Sartrean sense in which he always has a choice; not to acknowledge that choice is just to be in "bad faith". It might be that all of his options are bad; he might seek medical treatment and not get it or get it and continue to suffer. But that doesn't mean he doesn't consent to his current situation. A woman who does not tacitly consent to be raped and consequently gets killed would be demeaned by that treatment too. But there is a sense in which she consents to that; she chooses it over the other demeaning option. By contrast, a person who did not consent even tacitly--- who was injured by a brick that just happened to fall from a building, or who died in an accidental plane crash-- - would not be the object of demeaning treatment. Demeaning acts not only *can* involve consent but necessarily *do*.

This is perhaps central to what we find so insidious or infuriating about demeaning treatment. In some sense, it is willed or chosen; but of course we are forced to will it. Willing something gives the illusion of being a person or an agent, but the circumstances under which the person wills and the thing she is forced to choose lay bare that this is just an illusion, that she is not really being treated as a person after all. Perhaps

it is this pairing of a semblance of personhood with treatment that is so inappropriate to persons that is particularly characteristic of demeaning treatment. After all, we think slaughter of young children is horrible, but we don't usually think of it as demeaning. Taylor thought humiliation arose from divergence between where a person would place herself on a scale and where she was placed; in demeaning treatment there is a divergence between where the person would seem to be placed (in virtue of having a choice) and where she is actually placed.

3. Demeaning Treatment vs. Being Demeaned

Still, there is a difference between being the object of demeaning treatment and being demeaned. Even if demeaning treatment necessarily involves consent or submission, it does not follow that the person subjected to that treatment is thereby demeaned. So what is it to *be demeaned*? It does not help much to say that being demeaned means losing one's dignity. Jean Améry well expresses how vague a phrase that is. "I must confess that I don't know exactly what that is: human dignity. One person thinks he loses it when he finds himself in circumstances that make it impossible for him to take a daily bath. Another believes he loses it when he must speak to an official in something other than his native language...." (Améry, pp.27-28.)

Being demeaned seems to involve some sort of acceptance of the place on the scale and the characterization as less than a person, even if only be a fleeting acceptance of or acquiescence to that judgement. If I am demeaned by a demeaning action I feel small, I feel like less than a person, I see myself through the eyes of the person who demeans me. During World War II the Nazis sought not only to treat Jews demeaningly but to make them feel demeaned; through "excremental assault" they attempted to make Jews *see themselves* as vermin, as something despicable.¹⁸

But even if one consents to demeaning treatment, he need not accept the view of

himself that is reflected by such treatment. The story about the Chasidic men who are made to dance continues: they begin to dance, first reticently, and then eventually fervently, becoming completely consumed by the dance and their own faith and values. They lose sight of the circumstances under which they dance, and the consequences that will befall them if they don't. This is a clear case of people who are not demeaned by demeaning treatment. They do not see themselves as their abusers see them but rather maintain their image of themselves as people and of their dance as something valuable. Their consent to dance does not involve consent to see themselves the way the SS men see them.

So one may be the object of demeaning treatment without being demeaned. But can one be demeaned without being subject to demeaning treatment? The answer will depend on the further question whether it is possible to feel demeaned and be mistaken. Consider someone feeling like less than a person while being treated with the respect normally given persons. Perhaps a woman who feels put-down and humiliated in a seminar even though she is treated the way people are normally treated in seminars would be such a case. Feelings of inferiority or insecurity, previous treatment and conditioning, attributing the wrong intentions to other members of the seminar, or simply expecting to be treated differently could make her feel this way. An artist's model might be another such case. It would be odd to say that to draw or paint or sculpt a model would be treatment unbecoming a person. Yet as a model for art classes, I have, to my surprise, felt undeniably objectified. While modeling, it is easy to see oneself suddenly as merely an object, as uniquely a thing with volume and texture and shadow and line. It is as if all thoughts, feelings, and opinions simply don't exist; one matters only as a body and feels like less than a person because of that. On the face it these examples must either be cases of being demeaned while not subject to demeaning treatment, or of mistakenly feeling demeaned when one is not. It is not clear how we should regard them, and we'll have to keep this difficulty in mind when dealing with unclear or borderline cases.

4. Demeaning Oneself and Demeaning By Example

At any rate, now that we have a distinction between demeaning treatment and being demeaned, we can take up other related questions. Is it possible to demean oneself? More specifically, can one treat oneself demeaningly, and can one be demeaned by one's own demeaning treatment? Mortification of the flesh is a prime example of physically abusive treatment that is self-inflicted; people may beat themselves, starve themselves, or cause other kinds of physical pain. Medieval saints stood for hours with arms outstretched; Saint Simeon Stylites lived for over thirty years at the top of a pole. Certain forms of psychological self-abuse may be equally inhuman. Acting in a subservient or fawning way could be self-demeaning. And eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia are cases in which the self-inflicted demeaning treatment has both a physical and psychological dimension.

But the example of mortification of the flesh well shows that self-demeaning treatment need not lead to being demeaned by oneself. Mortification of the flesh is intended to lead the person to a sort of spiritual triumph over embodiment and the problems and temptations it poses.¹⁹ If it succeeds the person will not feel or judge himself to be demeaned but rather will have more dignity; he will not succumb to a dehumanizing view of himself. It is more difficult to find cases in which one is actually demeaned by oneself. Perhaps people who are self-abusive, for example bulimics or those who overeat compulsively, could feel so degraded by their self-inflicted eating patterns that they would qualify as such cases. Other kinds of self-loathing might qualify; someone might see himself and his actions as so despicable that he regards himself as less than a person.

Treating oneself demeaningly might have broader ramifications than we think. There is a curious feature of demeaning treatment: demeaning seems to work by example.

If a woman is shown in a pornographic film, we commonly say this is demeaning treatment of all women, not just of the individual who acted in the film.²⁰ If an action is demeaning to a person and we identify that person as a member of a particular group which seems salient in that context then we often think the action demeaning to all members of that group. If there is no group that seems to be salient in the context of the action then we may take the act to be demeaning to all persons. This will be the case regardless of whether or not anyone actually feels demeaned by the treatment.

Let's consider the case of Annie Sprinkle who was a prostitute and self-made porno queen before she became a performance artist. We might think that because of her feminist views she has not treated herself or any other women demeaningly. But whatever she thinks, she has treated herself as an object for consumption, something that could be seen as less than a person. She did this willfully and voluntarily and was probably not demeaned by the demeaning treatment (although some of her performance art makes that less clear), but none of this is reason to think she did not treat herself demeaningly. Furthermore, she exemplifies women, and by treating herself demeaningly she treats other women demeaningly as well. In presenting herself as an object for consumption and pleasure, not a person, and in functioning as a representative of women, she suggests that women be seen as such objects, or makes it more likely that they will be seen in this way. This will probably affect the treatment, representation and even self-esteem of other women. They may or may not be demeaned by this treatment; that will depend on how they come to view themselves. But it seems that Annie would have to agree that they too are treated demeaningly; after all, she thinks that the sex-positive performance art she now creates not only affects how people see her but also empowers other women and gives them a sense of dignity.

III. Is Self-Mutilation Demeaning?

1. *Self-Mutilation in General*

Does mutilation constitute demeaning treatment? Of course it will depend on the society's received opinion about the way a person should be treated. But in cases in which mutilation is seen as not befitting persons, we might think that there is a kind of sanctity or respect that should be had for bodies. By not respecting the body, we would be failing to respect the person whose body it is. In any case, we deny him control over his own body; and such control is something we normally think persons should be granted (this is why abortion, prostitution, and seatbelt laws are so controversial). In this way mutilation might constitute demeaning treatment.

In the case of self-mutilation, we cannot say that one denies oneself control of one's own body by mutilating it, so the act is not an offense against the person in that way. One could certainly fail to respect one's own body and in virtue of this be failing to respect oneself, but does this constitute demeaning treatment? It depends what amount of respect we think people deserve. But surely, lack of respect could be a reason to find something demeaning; we don't find rape demeaning only because someone is being denied control of her body but because of the gross lack of respect of body and person.

It's not clear that all cases of bodily self-mutilation are disrespectful though, and even if they are disrespectful, it's not clear how much disrespect would make something demeaning. Ear, nose, and other body piercing, as well as tattooing, eyebrow tweezing, and fingernail cutting are not obviously disrespectful at all. In fact, they may even be done out of admiration, beautification, and respect for the body. Cosmetic surgery is also done for the sake of beautification but involves much more bodily violence so it's harder to say whether it's respectful or not. There are places where intuition fails us. What is important to realize is that self-mutilation *can* be demeaning but is not necessarily so. And as with other demeaning acts, the agent/object may or may not be demeaned by the

action.

More interestingly, self-mutilation could be demeaning to others in the same way that something like pornography can be indirectly demeaning. In treating himself demeaningly, the mutilator suggests this treatment of the others with whom we identify him, or presents them to us in a different light. He thus calls into question the sanctity of the bodies of others, making the violation of their bodies seem a live possibility and even seem more permissible. A world with such mutilated bodies is a world in which people are not treated and respected in the ways we normally expect them to be. It does not matter if this actually happens, if the possibility he raises is realized. By raising this possibility and presenting people in this way, the mutilator already demeans them. Furthermore, the act of showing people this possibility, making them aware of it, could also be perceived as a kind of violence against them.

Let us consider more closely what the viewer experiences. On seeing someone mutilate herself one might imagine oneself mutilated in the same way and feel humiliated or objectified. But beyond that, such demeaning acts make us seem like non-people, like animals or objects, and thus challenge our views of ourselves, or of human life in general. They make us wonder if it is an illusion that we are sophisticated creatures with complex emotional lives and the ability to care, respect, love, etc. This grim picture makes us feel disillusioned, perhaps despairing. It makes having a sense of dignity seem difficult and trying to rise above this condition seem futile. It forces us to reinterpret our own actions, to explain them in base ways, to cast aside as self-deception any feelings we thought of as “higher”. It makes us angry to have been deceived, or to have been un-deceived, and as a result, to question the value of human life--- if this is what it really is. Perhaps much of the value we grant human life relies upon a different picture of human beings, and so seeing humans in the same light as objects and animals makes us nihilistic about the worth of human life. Leading people to experience this kind of vertigo is a kind of violence against them.

Finally, can an act of self-mutilation which is not demeaning to the mutilator still be demeaning to others? It is difficult to imagine such a case. If we found the act demeaning to others it would be because we found the act demeaning to the agent, and if we didn't find it demeaning to the agent, why would it demean others? Perhaps a crucifixion like Chris Burden's *Trans-fixed* would demean, or at least offend, a staunch atheist, but in that case it wouldn't do so in virtue of the fact that the crucifixion was an act of mutilation. Rather, if I accept the view that Ron Athey's self-mutilation in *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* is not demeaning because by poking a needle repeatedly into his forehead he creates the image of a crown of thorns and thus presents himself as someone whose suffering is redeemed, I will not take him to demean others. The portrait of people he presents is one that (although gory) still preserves dignity and respect; in fact, he seems to be concerned with just that, finding a way to respect himself. But if I see his actions merely as destructive, and devoid of the respect I think worthy of persons, then I will take him to demean others by sticking a needle into his forehead.

2. Self-Mutilation in Performance

This leads us to the question of self-mutilation in performance art. Performance can be regarded as a kind of insulating frame which affects the identity, ramifications, and moral value of an act. Is an act that we would otherwise deem demeaning still demeaning when it's in the context of a performance? The answer depends clearly on the status of acts done as part of a performance. It has been argued that all works of performance art, and of the performing arts in general, are instances of "make-believe"²¹ and have a different metaphysical status than those that are not. "People who want to make 'everything real,' including killing animals, the 'art' of self-mutilation, or 'snuff films' where people are actually murdered, are deceiving themselves if they think they are approaching a deeper or more essential reality," writes performance theorist Richard

Schechner. "All of these actions-- like the Roman gladiatorial games or Aztec human sacrifices-- are as symbolic and make-believe as anything else on stage. What happens is that living beings are reified into symbolic agents."²²

Collingwood makes a similar distinction in speaking not about art proper but about what he calls "amusement art." "We have already seen," he says, "that amusement implies a bifurcation of experience into a 'real' part and a 'make-believe' part, and that the make-believe part is called amusement in so far as the emotions aroused in it are also discharged in it and are not allowed to overflow into the affairs of 'real' life."²³

According to Collingwood emotions will have no effect, ramifications, or consequences outside of the context of the performance. Emotions aroused will not lead us to action in the "real" world; judgements made in the performative context will no longer hold outside of it.

On Collingwood's view it would seem to follow that something that is demeaning in a performance is not demeaning in real life even if its real life analog would be, and vice versa. Perhaps Collingwood would have to admit that performance self-mutilation does demean people in real life because there is in fact mutilation going on in real life at the same time. The actor who gets angry in the make-believe situation does not actually simultaneously get angry in real life (at least under some theories of acting), but the person who mutilates himself in the make-believe situation *does* mutilate himself in real life, and thus might be demeaned in real life as well.

There is much to take issue with in Collingwood's view. I will limit my criticism to his claim that the emotional content of a "make-believe" situation has no effect in the world outside of this artificial context. People currently present plays and performance works about AIDS, countless authors have been blacklisted or exiled, and Plato sought to banish the poets from the ideal republic just because the emotions aroused by performances have such strong effects on the actions of people when they leave the theater. They may not act in the simplistic ways Collingwood describes; they don't call

the police or run from the theater if someone is violent on stage. But they do react. If emotions didn't transcend a performative context it is unlikely that Jews in Germany would be boycotting the restaging of anti-Semitic plays.²⁴ It is possible to demean *real* people by example through *make-believe* demeaning treatment.

We might wonder exactly whom make-believe demeaning treatment demeans. Actors and dancers who have played the roles of abused people often end up feeling abused and harrowed by the experience. On one hand, we can see how an actress who is demeaned in a play is not actually demeaned; we know how to make a distinction between actress and character. But on the other hand, it sometimes seems that the person, the actress, too is demeaned, that if the demeaning treatment is extreme enough it goes beyond the bounds of the fiction. At any rate, there is much more interplay between the “real” and the “make-believe” than Collingwood admits when it comes to demeaning treatment in performance.

An alternative view takes demeaning or otherwise offensive and disturbing acts to be insulated by their contexts not because the context is “make-believe” but because it is an aesthetic or artistic one. Danto describes how potentially offensive passages of Joyce’s *Ulysses* were defended by suggesting that if they were “understood as forming parts of aesthetic wholes ... The concept of art interposes between life and literature a very tough membrane, which insures the incapacity of the artist to inflict moral harm so long as it is recognized that what he is doing is art.”²⁵ On such a view, demeaning treatment in an artistic context should not be taken as offensive, and negative moral pronouncements of it should not be made.

At the other extreme we find those whose response to the content of works of art is completely oblivious to their artistic context. Consider the attacks on the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano which focus purely on the content of that work. Helms does not seem to think that a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine is any different from a crucifix submerged in urine. Alexander Nehamas says rightly that in such an approach

to art the works are regarded as “transparent.”

The conventions, therefore, which make it clear that the representation of a person behaving in a certain way is an object in its own right, with its own features and value (positive or negative) are ignored. This has two serious implications. First, instead of taking the representation of a person as the primary object of interest, we tend to focus on that very person: the formal manner in which a character is constructed becomes secondary to the overall quality of the construct. Second, the possibility that the point of view of an artist toward the representation of a character may be different from the artist’s point of view on the character itself is overlooked. If the representation is transparent, or invisible, then naturally neither its features nor its maker’s attitude toward it can be salient.(Nehamas, p.353)

For a person who sees works as transparent in this way the work itself will be seen as demeaning, for the content just *is* the work. On this “transparency” view, reactions to the content of a work are simply reactions to the work itself. So a work of art that involves some demeaning action will be a demeaning work of art.

All of these views are somehow too extreme. In fact, the features of the performative context are not so powerful as to make us bracket everything else. We are often greatly disturbed or offended by demeaning acts in performance; we find them demeaning not only to the character but to the actor, to ourselves, or to other viewers or model viewers. On the other hand, an artistic context is not a transparent one. It affects the way a sensitive viewer perceives an act, so that some things that might be demeaning outside of that context are not demeaning in it. Most importantly, an artistic context invites interpretation and highlights the fact that it does so, thus affecting a viewer’s judgement about whether something is demeaning.

For many actions there are interpretations that make them seem demeaning and

others that don't. For example, the Balanchine ballet *Ivesiana* displays the entire *corps de ballet* crossing the stage on its knees. In the context of the work this was a radical move, but not a demeaning act. On the other hand, if this were a ballet about Fascism and other things in the ballet supported this interpretation, crossing the stage in this way might constitute demeaning treatment of characters the dancers portrayed. When Peter Greenaway's film *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover* is taken at face value it often seems demeaning and offensive. But if the film is interpreted as an allegory (there are many references to the story of Adam and Eve), it might not seem so demeaning; or if the violence still appears demeaning, it may be explicable such that the film as a whole need not be. Ron Athey's self-mutilation in "Four Scenes in a Harsh Life" seems demeaning when interpreted as self-destructive, or as representative of late twentieth century despair. But according to the interpretation of Mark Russell, director of the performance space P.S. 122, "When his work is described, it sounds gory and sensational; experiencing it is a different matter... You watch a man deal with his own suffering and mortality, without artifice. It makes an audience ask questions of themselves: about the relationship to pain, to disease, to taboos."²⁶

So a performative context does not insulate or justify; rather it provides an invitation to artistic interpretation. Interpretation will often make things that seem initially demeaning seem less so by placing actions in a frame that changes their function. Under interpretation, a demeaning act might thus be taken to reveal, to accuse, or to call for social change... But this leads to a problem. If we recognize something as a work of art we will be more likely to continue to interpret it and thus possibly more likely to reach the conclusion that it is not demeaning. But if something strikes us as demeaning enough from the beginning we might have an aversion to interpreting it further, or even to calling it a work of art, which would suggest that we should interpret it further. Thus the things that strongly seem demeaning at first glance will be more likely to stay demeaning for us, and the things that don't seem demeaning are more likely to be vindicated by

interpretation. The cards are stacked.

Part of the problem here is that we don't have criteria for identifying works of art; there is no way to read whether something is a work of art off of its surface.²⁷ And so even if we think that works of art invite a certain kind of extended interpretation, we still don't always know when to invest our time and effort. The thought that something is demeaning may be enough to prevent labeling it art and making that investment. But what if we do? Let's see what happens in Stelarc's case.

IV. The Case of Stelarc

1. Stelarc's Street Suspension: Initial Impressions

In *Street Suspension*, Stelarc pierces his back, legs, and neck with metal hooks and suspends himself from a system of pulleys and ropes over 11th Street and Avenue B in what is known as a "Superman" suspension.²⁸ Perhaps this does not result in permanent physical damage (although it is unlikely that he is not scarred), but at the very least he has undergone disfigurement, risk of infection, risk of further injury, and possibly extreme pain²⁹ for the sake of his performance. We know that he consents to this; in fact, he has gone to great lengths to make it happen.

One might well think that this behavior is demeaning. By piercing his body with hooks and hanging himself up, Stelarc is treating his body as an object, and treating it grossly without respect. He may not intend to harm it or defile it, but by normal standards such treatment is extremely disrespectful. In virtue of this, he is treating himself with less respect than we normally give persons, and thereby demeaning himself.

If Stelarc's action is self-demeaning then it demeans others as well. It is unclear from the work whether he is exemplifying any particular group. The piece does not seem to make salient the fact that he is a man, an Australian, of a certain age, hetero- or

homosexual, etc. So perhaps if his work is demeaning then it demeans all people. He presents himself as an example of how people could be seen as flesh to be mutilated.

It has been misleading to speak until now as if there is a dichotomy between how something seems initially and how it seems under interpretation. It is not as if we apprehend anything prior to interpretation. In saying simply, "It's a man suspended from fish hooks," or "that's demeaning," we are already interpreting Stelarc's actions. But we are not interpreting them extensively. We may not even be interpreting them self-consciously. And we are probably not interpreting very responsibly. A work of art is complex, and we can't just read off the face of it whether it's demeaning. So given that we're already interpreting, how does Stelarc's work bear up under more prolonged and detailed interpretation? Can further interpretation change the initial impression that the work is demeaning?

2. Interpretation of Stelarc's Street Suspension

There are four features of Stelarc's work that seem so salient that a good interpretation should not fail to address them. They are: his defiance of gravity, his position relative to the ground, his use of the fish hooks, and the location of the event. I will discuss each of these in turn, gradually constructing an interpretation, a story about what Stelarc's piece is about.³⁰

I. Obviously, it is relevant that Stelarc is hanging in the air. He is not simply elevated but he is hanging; there is no surface beneath him on which he rests. But attempting to defy gravity is not new. The myth of Icarus and ensuing schemes for human flight suggest that people have long been intrigued by flying and defying gravity. Stelarc even says that his performance involved "the idea of the body as this projectile propelled by desire to transcend its evolutionary limitations."³¹ I will view Stelarc's work in the context of the attempts to defy gravity we find so readily throughout the history of dance

and movement theater. Perhaps by presenting such a stark, almost crude example, *Street Suspension* not only becomes part of this dance/theater tradition of trying to defy gravity, but also refers to it.³²

In the Romantic Ballet, the ability to levitate was part of the sylph-like ideal for the ballerina, and she sought to create the illusion of flight or levitation.³³ In the early nineteenth century the development of pointework for ballerinas was supposed to help achieve this illusion of the ballerina hovering just above the ground. Partnering added another dimension to the ballerina's capacity for suspension, and advances in set design and lighting furthered the illusion of the fairy spirit in flight.

But perhaps the innovative use of various kinds of technical apparatus made the greatest headway in allowing ballerinas to levitate. The Taglioni version of *La Sylphide* (1832), for example, utilized pulley systems which enabled the actual flight of the sylphides. Marie Taglioni vanished up the chimney, alighted on a window ledge, and at the end of Act II was borne away through the treetops.³⁴ In fact, the development of pointework could be seen as an outgrowth of the theatrical acrobatics that thrilled audiences of the time. A great innovator of flying techniques was Charles Didelot. According to Deborah Jowitt, "Any of his dancers might fly by means of individual wires and harnesses. They could take to the air, or be carefully lowered until only the tips of their toes touched the stage floor." (Jowitt, p.38). In the dream sequence in Act I of *La Péri*, Carlotta Grisi leaped boldly from the raised platform that delimited "her world" into the arms of her hero, Lucien Petipa, below.

In the early twentieth century modern dance began to evolve in the United States, influenced by movement sources such as the classical ballet, the Follies, and calisthenics. The dancer's relation to gravity was still of great concern, but now gravity was seen as something to be revealed; the dancer allowed the audience to see just how much she was affected by this pull to the earth. This is most evident in the modern dance technique developed by Doris Humphrey. Her fundamental principle of fall and recovery was

completely concerned with the dancer's changing relation to gravity. She regarded the dancer's fall away from center or equilibrium as a submission to gravity (and metaphorically, as a loss of self), and the return to center as a defiance of gravity (and an assertion of individualism). All of Humphrey's work, and the work of José Limón who followed in that tradition, is preoccupied with this constant flux between giving in to and asserting oneself against gravity.

American modern dance has become more athletic with time, and in the past two decades there has been a trend toward a kind of athleticism that involves lots of leaping and jumping. Perhaps this athletic quality grew out of the contact improvisation of the 1960's in which virtuosic improvisers threw themselves onto, over and at each other. One of its legacies is an emphasis on flight, on being airborne. For example, in Mark Morris' *Gloria*, dancers fly through the air as if they were thrown up out of the ground. Their flight is made all the more spectacular by the presence of intermittent tortoise-like crawling movements by some of the dancers. In his solo *Caught*, David Parsons used a strobe light to create the illusion that his large body was suspended in the air, that he moved about the stage without ever coming down. And in *FREEFLIGHT*, Elizabeth Streb sent a constant stream of dancers diving off a forty foot point so that what the audience saw was not so much their descent but a parade of bodies in the air.

Other experiments in movement theater have used technical aids to create flight effects. Momix has used a huge spherical structure so that a man swinging from bar to bar as the structure rolls around the stage never touches or approaches the ground. Access Movement Disabled Dance Troupe has presented disabled people flying out of wheelchairs with the help of trapezes, and Philadelphia choreographer Eric Schoefer has used rock-climbing equipment to explore space. In *Kiss*, Susan Marshall revealed the brute mechanics behind romance; two dancers suspended from wires and leather harnesses flew around the space in order to meet and kiss in the air. Boston choreographer Susan Rose and sculptor Taylor McLean were suspended from ropes and

harnesses, hanging upside down and constructing the set during Rose's *The Sun Makes A Promise*. And in California, Project Bandaloop combines dancers and rock climbers to create dances on high-up rock faces; with the aid of harnesses, ropes, and rock-climbing protection, they push off horizontally from the rock, twirling and flipping while hanging in the air.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of such exploration is Elizabeth Streb's *Fly*. *Fly* uses a giant mechanical arm that supports a dancer in a gyroscopic belt so that she can soar over the heads of dancers on the ground in a "Superman" position, or spin in the air and walk on the ceiling. This dancer is in the closest position we've seen to Stelarc's position in *Street Suspension*, and perhaps not surprisingly. While Stelarc is interested in the body as a projectile "propelled by desire" to transcend evolutionary limits, perhaps nothing might be more aptly said of Elizabeth Streb. "Everything I've done on some level has been an attempt to fly," she says.³⁵ And her physically risky and sometimes harrowing dances seem to be a high-impact version of Stelarc's testing of the body's limits.

So Stelarc can be seen as part of a dance tradition, broadly construed, of attempts to be in the air, to appear to hover or float above the ground without resting on any surface. Interestingly, although he is suspended, he does not seem to make typical sweeping or flying motions. His arms are extended bluntly forward. We might ask what this conveys in connection with the theme of defying gravity. Is there something deconstructive or ironic about his position? Stelarc might be suggesting that there is a certain naiveté or futility to such attempts to fly, or that ultimately, flying is illusion. Perhaps this is why he shows us the system of pulleys and hooks that hold him up.

II. Many of the other illusions of flight that I've mentioned have not involved suspension from something above the dancer so it's worth considering the relevance of Stelarc's suspension from rigging above him.

The great majority of dance and theater has kept the natural ground as a fixed point of reference, as something that sets the orientation of the event, and as something the performers relate to. In dance, concern with gravity is usually manifest in floorwork (literally being on the ground), or desire to *get off the ground*--- to jump higher, to be lifted off the ground, etc--- not desire to be dropped from a higher ceiling. But this orientation has been challenged.

In 1971 Trisha Brown presented *Walking on the Wall* in which dancers used climbing gear and external support systems to walk perpendicularly on the walls of the Whitney Museum.³⁶ In 1993, Elizabeth Streb presented her third “wall piece” entitled *Look Up* which involved dancing on a forty foot wall. Four dancers were harnessed to rigging at the top of the wall and then suspended perpendicularly from the wall so that they extended out over the audience. They gradually made their way down the wall, jumping, leaping, doing handstands, and somersaulting, using the wall as their floor.

This produced an interesting Gestalt shift for the viewer. The wall could be seen as the ground and the viewer could be seen as observing from a wall. Elizabeth Streb was indeed interested in this kind of shift. “We are so relegated to a flat space or to coming or going to vertical space, although I try to create three-dimensional space for the audience... My hope is to build something that totally throws the audience off of where they are or think they are on earth. I don’t want them to be able to walk out in a straight line.”³⁷ We see this effort to shift our perspective equally in her new work *Fly*. Streb said “she was tired of the fact that gravity made the floor the inevitable departure point for action. The mechanical arm permits her, in her words, to ‘divest the floor of its hegemony.’ ” (ibid.)

Stelarc too divests the floor of its hegemony. The fact that he is suspended from a structure above him (and not elevated on poles or skewered from the sides) produces a similar sort of Gestalt shift. The pulley system above him could be seen as a “ground” or point of reference.³⁸ This leads us to think that the work also comments on our

assumptions about frames of reference. It challenges our assumptions about how art should be presented, our complacency with regard to physical or conceptual limitations, and our passivity as viewers in looking at our environment. More metaphorically, the work could also be taken to suggest our lack of a relativistic view or perhaps our need for one. But it is unclear how much we should dwell on this, since if this were the main focus of Stelarc's work one would think he would do more to emphasize relativity of frames of reference. He might also not need to resort to such drastic measures (fish hooks through his skin) to position himself relative to the frame of reference. It seems that the use of the fish hooks goes so far beyond what is necessary to make a point about frames of reference and is so striking that it should be considered independently.

III. Why fish hooks and why fish hooks through the skin? I should say clearly to begin that Stelarc does not try to create the image of a caught fish. He does not hang from his mouth or even his head, and uses not one hook but many. So what impression does this produce?

Most immediately, it makes him seem more like an object and less like an agent. He seems a thing that is hung and not a person who is hanged. Perhaps this is because of the actual manner in which he is hung--- like a tapestry or a curtain--- or perhaps it is because we assume that we would not hang a person with hooks through his or her skin. At any rate, this creates a strange effect because, on the other hand, we still do see Stelarc as an agent. We know that he is the artist, that this is his work, that he is not a helpless victim of violence by some other person. He willed this event and he effected it even if he had the help of others to execute his plans. Thus there is an interesting ambiguity to the situation he has created: Stelarc is glaringly both an object and an agent, and thus highlights Sartre's claim that each person is both a being *en soi* and a being *pour soi*. By example, Stelarc shows us how we too, although we usually think of ourselves as agents, can also be seen as objects. He reminds us that we really are both objects and agents at

the same time.

By using his body in this way, Stelarc also challenges the distinction between the artist and her work, or at least suggests that they can be one and the same. He himself, a physical object, becomes the *objet d'art*. If instead we choose to see the event and not the body as the work of art then he is the medium or part of the raw material. This is not unique; dance has always used the human body as its medium. But Stelarc seems to go beyond dance in some way. Is it because he does not just mold the body but mutilates or punctures it?

Stelarc uses himself as raw material the way a sculptor uses a piece of stone or wood. He makes holes in himself in a way that suggests use of an object, not a person. He thus *shows* or *exemplifies* being the raw material for his work in the way that a dancer, even though she is also raw material, does not. Even the inhumanly neutral dancers of Merce Cunningham (who uses dancers as bodies moving abstractly in space) do not seem to show this nearly so much. A dancer's use of his body still suggests agency. Although the body *is* raw material in dance, the use of it is still compatible with its being seen as the body of an agent, and usually does not highlight the fact that it is raw material. Furthermore, the dancer still does not highlight this fact when her body is mutilated by dancing (as is often the case with use of pointe shoes), because the mutilation is not part of the content of the piece. Stelarc, on the other hand, exemplifies "raw-materialness" because he uses himself the way we normally *only* use inanimate objects and because this use is part of the content of his piece.

But while he exemplifies being raw material, Stelarc also remains the artist. And since this objectifying treatment is that of the artist by the artist, and results not simply in the artist's destruction but in his transformation into the work of art, it suggests a kind of self-sacrifice of the artist for his or her work. We can trace such self-sacrifice in the history of art and even find it as a theme in works of art. In his *Last Judgement*,

Michaelangelo depicts himself as a drooping skin in the hands of Saint Bartholemew, and

in Thomas Mann's novella *Tonio Kröger*, Tonio is a perfect example of the Nietzschean dictum, "one must die to life in order to become utterly a creator."³⁹

Artists have often sacrificed themselves physically for the sake of their work without explicitly making it part of the content of the work. By making such self-sacrifice overtly part of his work, Stelarc points to the many instances of self-sacrifice for art that occur continually outside of the context of the art itself. He does this ingeniously by showing the artist physically *become* the work of art, but he also refers to self-sacrifice even more directly. This act of mutilation which involves the piercing of his skin blatantly reminds us of acts of religious martyrdom and the stock representations of it throughout the history of art. In particular, it brings to mind Saint Sebastian who was tied to a stake and pierced with arrows. More obscurely, it recalls two saints who have a hook as their attribute. Saint Matine of Rome was a virgin martyr who was raked with hooks as part of a series of tortures, and Saint Blaise was an Armenian bishop who was strung up from a pole on a pulley system and raked with iron hooks!⁴⁰

The combination of piercing and self-sacrifice also alludes to the most popularized self-sacrifice in art, the crucifixion of Christ. Through this connection Stelarc presents himself, or the artist in general, as a Christ figure. Clearly, others have done this before him, perhaps most flamboyantly Salvador Dali.⁴¹ But Stelarc does something interesting with this statement. His suspension in the air seems relevant given that he could have achieved mutilation and martyrdom without it; this leads us to see another allusion to religious art. This is an ascension with a twist. In paintings of the ascension of Christ or Mary to heaven, they are usually depicted standing upright. It seems almost funny: Stelarc is ascending and yet he is horizontal.

A connection has been established between Christ and the artist. Christ sacrifices himself and ascends to heaven. The artist sacrifices himself and ascends... but where? And why? Why should this kind of physical sacrifice (through piercing) and metaphorical sacrifice (through becoming the *objet d'art*) lead to ascension? Scarry's discussion of the

role of pain in religion perhaps provides a clue. She holds that pain clears the way for otherworldly, spiritual forces.

It is in part this world-ridding, path-clearing logic that explains the obsessive presence of pain in the rituals of large, widely shared religions as well as in the imagery of intensely private visions, that partly explains why the Crucifixion of Christ is at the center of Christianity ..., why in the brilliant ravings of Artaud some ultimate and essential principle of reality can be compelled down from the heavens onto a theatre stage by the mime of cruelty, why, though it occurs in widely different contexts and cultures, the metaphysical is insistently coupled with the physical with the equally insistent exclusion of the middle term, world. (Scarry, p.34)

Perhaps Stelarc is a postmodern Artaud clearing the way for something otherworldly on the street, i.e. the contemporary stage. His physical ascent or elevation could be a metaphor for a kind of psychological or spiritual transcendence that the artist achieves only very slowly and tentatively while being an artist. The artist at some point leaves the work behind.

But then why does he ascend in this primitive and strange way and not like a person or a bird? It is difficult to say; we would need to know more about the work. Perhaps Stelarc shows that such ascent is only primitive, tentative... The ascent of the artist is tentative and humble.

IV. But why does Stelarc choose this particular intersection over which to explore this subject? The neighborhood he chooses is seedy, rough, or unsafe, but also trendy, populated by punks, artists, druggies, and homeless people. This choice reinforces the religious theme. Christ found an audience in the down and out, the oppressed; perhaps this community is the contemporary analog of that audience. If Christ supposedly offered

salvation to people and Stelarc is identified with Christ, then by analogy we might think that Stelarc too offers salvation to his audience. Like Christ he sacrifices himself, but here the self-sacrifice is also an instance of creating art and Stelarc is recognizable as an artist in an artistic tradition. So in creating art he sacrifices himself. And by sacrificing himself he offers salvation. Thus by creating art Stelarc offers salvation.

But what kind of salvation does Stelarc offer? By creating art, people come to live in a world that is somehow different from the mundane world of physical objects. This seems related to Paul Klee's claim that the artist creates "realities of art which help to lift life out of its mediocrity."⁴² Perhaps by apprehending art, people can eventually come to share this experience, to transcend metaphorically the way Stelarc transcends literally. Furthermore, Stelarc's use of fish hooks makes reference to punks and sadomasochists (both of whom can be found in this neighborhood), and so possibly establishes him as a representative of these groups. If he, as a representative of that world, transcends, the East Village might transcend too.

To conclude then, we can see Stelarc's work as a quasi-religious commentary on art: the artist's self-sacrifice for art leads to his transcendence and offers salvation to others. Or maybe it should be seen as proposing a contemporary substitute for religion, a contemporary salvation, and thus suggesting the need for something of the sort. There is room for many other interpretations of the work, perhaps even others that contradict this one. But this will be adequate as a resource for our further discussion.

V. What Should We Think About Stelarc Now?

Stelarc's work might have seemed initially demeaning. Now, after prolonged discussion of it, we should call into question the initial impression we had. On the interpretation now developed, self-sacrifice and transcendence justify the mutilation so that it is not demeaning. Stelarc's actions are about elevating people (both literally and

metaphorically), not demeaning them.

An action could certainly still be demeaning even if it leads to an end that is not demeaning. A mother who tolerates continual harassment in order to stay in a job so that she can make money and provide her daughter with a more advantaged life may be doing something noble, and her self-sacrifice may lead to good ends, but her treatment on the job is still demeaning. This could apply to Stelarc's self-mutilation. He may not be demeaned by the treatment, but isn't it still demeaning to him? But when Stelarc mutilates himself and his self-sacrifice is an act of transcendence, he is *not* treating himself as less than a person in virtue of the fact that he transcends. We see him as an agent, as someone who transcends, and ultimately he doesn't appear to be treated like less than a person. Although piercing oneself with fish hooks could be demeaning, this instance of it is not.

It may be objected however that we are assuming that acts of self-sacrifice and transcendence are by nature not demeaning, and this doesn't seem justified. If a woman sacrifices herself to the pornography industry, and if a drug addict eventually transcends everything going on around her, these actions are still demeaning to them. There is nothing particularly noble about self-sacrifice or transcendence in themselves. In some cases of self-demeaning treatment the agent isn't demeaned by the treatment. Couldn't we simply see Stelarc the same way?

We have now come to the crux of the matter. Whether or not Stelarc's work is demeaning to him or others on this interpretation will still depend on a context of more basic value judgments that may vary. Stelarc sacrifices himself for art. By mutilating himself for this particular instance of it, he makes a claim about the worth of art in general. I *like* art; I think it's a good thing. I think it educates, it challenges intellectually, it makes life less mundane, richer, full of creative possibilities, it changes how we see the world--- in short, it's something worth sacrificing oneself for. If I didn't value art in this way, I might see this kind of self-sacrifice as demeaning, and the suggestion of

transcendence as warped and misguided. Some things give us the visceral impression that they are so utterly demeaning that no amount of interpretation will make us see them otherwise; which things do that depends on the values and assumptions we have to start with. Stelarc does not seem to be treating himself as less than a person given how I have chosen to interpret his action (as sacrifice for art) and *how I value art*. What one sees as demeaning depends heavily on the values one has to start with. It does not make life base and inane to sacrifice oneself for something that seems valuable.

From the case of Stelarc we might say we learn at least three things about deciding whether a given work is demeaning. Such decisions can only be made on a case by case basis. We have seen that the work of art is not transparent; we can't separate what is represented from how it's represented. And any decision about whether a work is demeaning presupposes at least some level of interpretation of that work. But having a fully articulated concept of demeaning treatment is not enough to make the decision for us; we could give a clearer and clearer account of what it is for something to be demeaning but the decisions would never follow automatically. We value different things differently and these values lead us to different judgements about the same actions. Even elaborate interpretation and justification will also not necessarily decide the case; we saw this with Stelarc. The interpretation of Stelarc's work was important because it allowed a more extended discussion about whether it was demeaning, but in the end I didn't find the work demeaning because of the value I attach to art while someone who feels differently about art, or rejects my interpretation of the work, may well think that the work is demeaning.

But what we now know is that self-mutilation in performance art *need not* be demeaning. This does not mean that it makes for good art. Even if not demeaning, it may be pretentious or gratuitous, and is frequently disturbing. But it need not be demeaning because there is an interpretation of the work under which it is not demeaning. And more importantly, this makes us see that if it *is* demeaning it can only be so under a given

interpretation of the work. The claim that certain works of art are demeaning is not to be read off the face of them. It is something that needs to be established. It is something that presupposes an interpretation that needs to be supported and justified. Why should art bashers have more interpretive freedom than art historians?

Sadly, in the controversy over public funding of the arts and the existence of the NEA, no one felt the need to justify *anything*. The conservative opposition spewed garble as if it were self-evident truth, and even supporters of the "offensive" works did not engage in any lengthy justification of their opinions or explication of the works of art. Ultimately, what will convince people of the value of such works is not simply asserting that they are valuable or "morally uplifting" but showing how under some interpretations they might not be demeaning or what we might learn from them even if they are. And what will protect art in our culture is demanding of its critics an articulate account of the interpretations they tacitly hold.

NOTES

¹ Many thanks to Sarah Buss, David Carrier, Catherine Elgin, Stefan Morawski, Alexander Nehamas, and Bas van Fraassen for their input and comments on versions of this material, and to the artists mentioned, for their inspiration.

² Stelarc himself cites his performance in dance festivals and calls himself "a performance artist who is interested in alternate aesthetic strategies."

³ *Congressional Record*, Vol.135, No.64, May 18, 1989, S5594; reprinted in Richard Bolton (ed.), *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992), pp.28-29.

⁴ *Congressional Record*, Vol.135, No.64, May 18, 1989, S5595; Bolton, p.30.

⁵ *Congressional Record*, *ibid.*; Bolton pp.29-30.

⁶ The fate of the NEA became uncertain. Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center was brought up on obscenity charges for exhibiting Mapplethorpe's photographs. And alarmist radio, television, and newspaper editorials heralded the accelerating end of Western civilization; see for example David Gergen's editorial "Who Should Pay for Porn?" (*U.S. News and World Report* of July 30, 1990; Bolton, pp.255-257)

⁷ Amendment No. 420, known as the Helms Amendment, prohibits the use of NEA funds for the dissemination, promotion or production of obscene materials or materials denigrating members of a particular religion, race, etc. (Bolton, pp.73-74).

⁸ Senator John Danforth, statement to the Senate, September 29, 1989 (Bolton, p.104).

⁹ Douglas Stalker and Clark Glymour, "The Malignant Object: Thoughts on Public Sculpture", *The Public Interest*, No.66, Winter, 1982, pp.3-21.

¹⁰ Cf. Joel Feinberg on feminist arguments against pornography, in his *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law, Volume Two: Offense to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.143-157.

¹¹ Cf. Walter Karp, "Where the Do-Gooders Went Wrong" in: Horace Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.433-444.

¹² Actually, Stalker and Glymour offer something of an argument to this effect. They say, "...the erection of public sculpture of the contemporary kind harms the interests of citizens who find it offensive: It begets more of the same... It does so indirectly by influencing the sense of beauty in the youthful, and thus causing them to welcome more of the same." (p.15)

¹³ Senator Slade Gordon, "On the Official Funding of Religious Bigotry", statement to the Senate, May 31, 1989 (Bolton, pp.33-34).

¹⁴ Karen Finley, "It's Only Art," *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, October, 1990.

¹⁵ Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-assessment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.16.

¹⁶ Compare Mark Tunick on the case of a Japanese woman in the U.S. who attempts the ancient Japanese custom of parent-child suicide to rid herself of shame, in his *Practices and Principles: Approaches to Ethical and Legal Judgement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Georges Bataille's account of sadism as based on the negation of the other seems related to the treatment unbecoming persons discussed above (see Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p.35. If Bataille's account is correct perhaps sadism is a case of demeaning treatment.

¹⁸ Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p.209: "Clearly, excremental assault was *designed* to produce in the victim a 'self-disgust' to the point of wanting death or even committing suicide...". The term refers to the practice that concentration camps inmates, often infected with dysentery, were prohibited from leaving their forced labor assignments to use washroom facilities.

¹⁹ Compare Elaine Scarry's account of how such treatment and the pain that accompanies it lead not only to triumph over the physical but also over the psychological, and thus derive their spiritual value, in her *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.34.

²⁰ Stalker and Glymour make a similar point in "The Malignant Object...": "the public display of pornography is claimed to have a kind of reflective effect on some people. On reflection, if one is a woman, one is *humiliated* by the depiction of women as simply and rightfully objects of lust who are nothing more than sexual slaves.", p.14.

²¹ Cf. Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²² Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge Press, 1988), p.170.

²³R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.94; see further page 79.

²⁴ Cf. Danto's discussion of Jewish protesters in Frankfurt preventing the *Kammerspiel Theater* from putting on an explicitly anti-semitic play by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, in his, "Dangerous Art" in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), p.191.

²⁵Alexander Nehamas, "Commentary on Halliwell's 'The Importance of Plato and Aristotle for Aesthetics' ", *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol.5, p.350.

²⁶William Harris, "Demonized and Struggling With His Demons," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1994, Sec.2, p.31.

²⁷Cf. Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol.15, No.1, Spring, 1956, pp.27-35 and Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), Chapter IV, "When is Art?", pp.57-70.

²⁸ Although I shall not do so, one might consider *Street Suspension* in view of Stelarc's numerous other body suspensions, first with harnesses from 1972 to 1975, and then with insertions into the skin from 1976 to 1988. In *Pull Out/PullUp event for self-suspension* and *Sitting/Swaying event for rock suspension* (both 1980) he was suspended in a sitting position by ropes attached to hooks through his skin. In *Seaside Suspension* (1981) and *City Suspension* (1985) he was suspended in a "Superman" suspension like that in *Street Suspension*. And in *Event for Lateral Suspension* (1978) he was suspended vertically upright by hooks attached to two side walls. These transformations of the body should be seen as part of Stelarc's more general reflection on the body and its limits; see the Croatian performing arts journal *Frakcija* No.4, March, 1997.

²⁹I say "possibly" because pain is a phenomenologically mysterious thing. Often something that would be excruciating in an instance of torture will not seem painful in the same way when the act is willed; cf. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), in particular pp.34 and 346-7. According to Traumatic Stress Discipline, a group that calls itself "an American collective, organized for the artistic demonstration of body suspensions and to disseminate any information pertaining to such", the kind of suspension Stelarc uses is less arduous than other types (<http://www.obscurities.com/tsd/>).

³⁰The interpretation will be *severely* limited by the fact that I have not seen the actual event but only photographic representations and descriptions of it and others like it. But the point is that moral judgements are wedded to interpretation, and that point could be made even if this example were only a hypothetical one.

³¹John Andrew Fisher, ed., *Reflecting on Art* (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1993), p.119. Alexander Nehamas has expressed some doubt about the appropriateness of assimilating Stelarc's work to a dance or movement theater tradition. That is reasonable but in fact the arts establishment too has seen fit to classify Stelarc's work in this way. He has performed in such dance events as the Charleroi Dance Biennale in Belgium, the Greenmill Dance Project in Melbourne, Australia, and "Dance '95" in Munich, Germany.

³²What I mean here is what Goodman would call *exemplifying* defying gravity. For Goodman, exemplification of a property "is possession plus reference" to that property. (Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), p.53). Stelarc's work both has the property of defying gravity and symbolizes or somehow points to that property, thus *exemplifying* it.

³³Adrian Stokes, "The Classical Ballet" from *Tonight the Ballet*, reprinted in: Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, eds., *What is Dance?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.246: "The ballerina's body is etherealized. She seems scarcely to rest upon the ground. She is, as it were, suspended just slightly above the earth so that we may see her better.". Dancers were compared to birds and butterflies and one English critic said that "dancing excels in proportion exactly as it resembles flying." (cited in Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.40).

³⁴Cf. Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), p.114.

³⁵Robert Johnson, "Tethering Newton's Apple to a Bungee Cord", *The New York Times*, December 14, 1997, Arts Section, p.10.

³⁶For a brief description and discussion of Trisha Brown's "Equipment Pieces," see: Sally Banes, *Terpsichore In Sneakers* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), pp.80-82.

³⁷"Jennifer Monson interviews Elizabeth Streb," *Movement Research Bulletin*, No.7, p.20. See also Robert Johnson, p.10.

³⁸Stelarc's distance from the ground also contributes to this sense that the rigging above him is a point of reference. Consider, by contrast, *Swoop*, a work by FREEFALL (Lynn Brown and Lynn Marie Ruse). Through use of a harness and large hook, Ruse is suspended but remains very close to the ground; the ground thus remains a point of reference for the piece.

³⁹Thomas Mann (trans. by H.T. Lowe-Porter), *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p.94. Tonio accepts not being part of the 'normal' life he so envies in order to produce art which he can only produce from the outside; he sacrifices his existence as a normal person for it.

⁴⁰For another comparison with religious practices, there are e.g. in Sri Lanka, Tamil pilgrims pierce their bodies with meat hooks and hang from scaffolding during the yearly Esala in Kataragama, in order to win the favor of the god of war, Skanda. American Indian rituals also involve piercing and hanging. The 1985 film *Dances Sacred and Profane* shows Fakir Musafar engaging in a traditional Sun Dance Ritual in which he hangs from two large hooks through the skin of his chest (see *Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly*, in particular No.9 ("Ripping Flesh: The Sun Dance Ritual") and Nos.13& 14 ("Fleshhooks: Suspensions and Tensions").

⁴¹In his outline of some of the principal moral roles of artists, Mark Stevens refers to a similar artistic type. He characterizes Van Gogh as the "modern prototype of the artist as victim" who "has become a kind of parable: He died of neglect; he died for our sins; he died that we might see." Mark Stevens, "The Artist Assumes the Pedestal," *Salmagundi*, Summer, 1996, p.119.

⁴²Paul Klee (trans. by Paul Findlay), "On Modern Art," (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1948),

p.51.