

The following is an entry, titled “Prosthetic Performance,” as it appears in *Reading Contemporary Performance: Reading Theatricality Across Genres* (Routledge: 2015), edited by Gabrielle Cody and Meiling Cheng. This entry is reproduced with the editors’ permission.

“Prosthetic Performance”

The word “prosthetic” comes from Greek, meaning an addition or attachment. Usually, a prosthetic (familarly a prosthetic limb) is used to enhance or extend the capabilities of something that is perceived as lacking. In a literal interpretation of the phrase, “prosthetic performance” can describe the use of mechanical and medical prosthesis in performance art. In a metaphorical sense, the phrase describes the afterlife of performances and how they can be experienced after-the-fact.

Between 1980 and 1988, Stelarc, an Australian performance artist, performed *Third Hand*. In this piece, Stelarc controlled a mechanical replica of his right hand with electric signals transmitted from muscles in his legs and abdomen to electrodes, that where then fed through a computer, and relayed back to his third hand. In world polluted by mass media, rapid technological advances, and ever-shrinking time-scales, Stelarc’s technological prostheses are not a “sign of lack, but rather a symptom of excess” (Stelarc 1988). Stelarc upends the traditional understanding of “prosthesis,” pointing towards a post-human world in which human life augments technology, rather than technology supplementing human life.

In a different interpretation of the phrase, prosthetic performance also describes how students, other artists, and laypeople experience performance art: after-the-fact. An understanding of “prosthetic performance” relies upon the idea that every performance is unique and irreplicable. Each instance of performance lives and dies the moment it is born. To “cure” performance’s ephemerality, prostheses have been developed to extend the life of a performance. These prostheses range from video and audio recordings,

photographs, to firsthand accounts, artist's scores, scripts, to academic analysis. Each of these documents breathe life into the perishing performance, themselves becoming "a surrogate that replaces and extends its lost origin" (Cheng, 2002, p.xxv). By consuming the documents surrounding a performance a person experiences the piece as a prosthetic performance. This prosthetic performance is similar to, but different than it's now-dead precursor.

Prosthetic performance is conceptually linked to the idea of prosthetic or false memory. Prosthetic memory is the assimilation of false memories through the consumption and synthesis of media. These prosthetic memories usually come in the form of stories "remembered" about ones childhood based on a picture, or events taken from movies or books that are remembered as part of the watcher or reader's life.

In *Beijing Xingwei*, Meiling Cheng discusses prosthetic performance in relationship to memory and documentary. Cheng demonstrates that many performances, particularly Qui Zhijie's series entitled *The Shape of Time* (2007), can only be experienced by the artist themselves as the piece is performed. In *The Shape of Time*, Qui inserts "his body into a chosen site, in front of his tripod-mounted camera, and [uses] a flashlight to inscribe in reverse calligraphy a linguistic phrase, illuminating his momentary poetic act" (Cheng, 2013, 397). The performance is captured by the camera, but is re-performed in the minds of gallery-goers or readers who view the images. The images are the documents that spawn the prosthetic performance in the minds of viewers—they are not the prosthetic performance, nor do they actually communicate the performance (in the purest sense) to viewers.

The concept of prosthetic performance relaxes the time-bound and place-bound understanding of performance art. It gives performances a life outside of the moment in which they happen, but also works towards a multi-centric understanding of performance. In the Information Age, the intention of the artist(s) and the qualities of the work are just as vital as the documentation and afterlife of the performance in the minds of the many.

Further Reading:

Cheng, M. 2002. *In other Los Angeleses*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cheng, M. 2013. *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese time-based art*. Seagull Books.

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D'ORLAN. [online] Available at: <http://www.orlan.eu/texts/> [Accessed: 1 Dec 2013].

Stelarc.org. 2013. *stelarc // Third Hand*. [online] Available at:

<http://stelarc.org/?catID=20265> [Accessed: 1 Dec 2013].