

An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions: The Drag of Physicality in a #digitalphysical Hybrid Ecology

Elly Clarke

¹ Stelarc: 'What is important is not a body's identity, but rather its connectivity. Not its mobility of location, but rather its interface and operation.' Performance by Stelarc in Second Life, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yA-371qDwBgm> (accessed 17.1.2018).

² <https://soundcloud.com/ser-gina/tracks> (accessed 17.1.2018).



What is important is not a body's identity, but rather its connectivity. Not its mobility of location but rather its interface and operation

Stelarc¹

As an artist, curator and someone who has been around long enough to remember life before the internet, I'm interested in the changing role, feel and experience of the physical body and object in our increasingly digitally-mediated and experienced world. I'm interested in the points at which being physical feels like a drag, and in the impact this has on the way we move, think, relate, interact. I explore this through photography (analogue and digital), performance, video, audio, music, text, curating and participatory/community-based projects. And through #Sergina, a gender-ambiguous, multi-bodied, border-straddling drag queen, who sings and performs songs about love, lust and loneliness² – with her mobile phone always in her hand. Appearing at first in solo form/at, #Sergina was soon shared out, becoming a wearable, transferable identity, played by several different people. #Sergina is at once physical and digital, online and offline, singular and plural, embodied and disembodied.

Fig. 1 (opposite page)
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Fig. 2
Duplicate...

³ Arthur Kroker, *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 3.

⁴ Carolee Schneeman in 'Ask the Goddess' (performance from 1991), quoted in Amelia Jones/Tracey Warr (ed.), *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000), p 17.

In a society that gets kicks out of images of its own kicks, I playfully and somewhat presumptuously propose #Sergina as everyone's selfie and no one's. She is fully herself and yet never can be herself, as the one self does not exist, and never did. #Sergina is up for grabs, and yet she is untouchable. She is an image and yet she is flawed (and confined) by her flesh/es. She is original and she is a copy. She is a self-sculpted C-celeb and she is no one. Her identity is viral, fluid and amendable, with the potential to self-replicate, given the right conditions. Her self is worn (out), on different bodies. She is the epitome of femininity, and yet she fails at this completely. She competes with her own image, and usually loses. She speaks in quotes, – (mostly) of herself, and (sometimes) of others – but does not distinguish between the two: everything is for the taking.

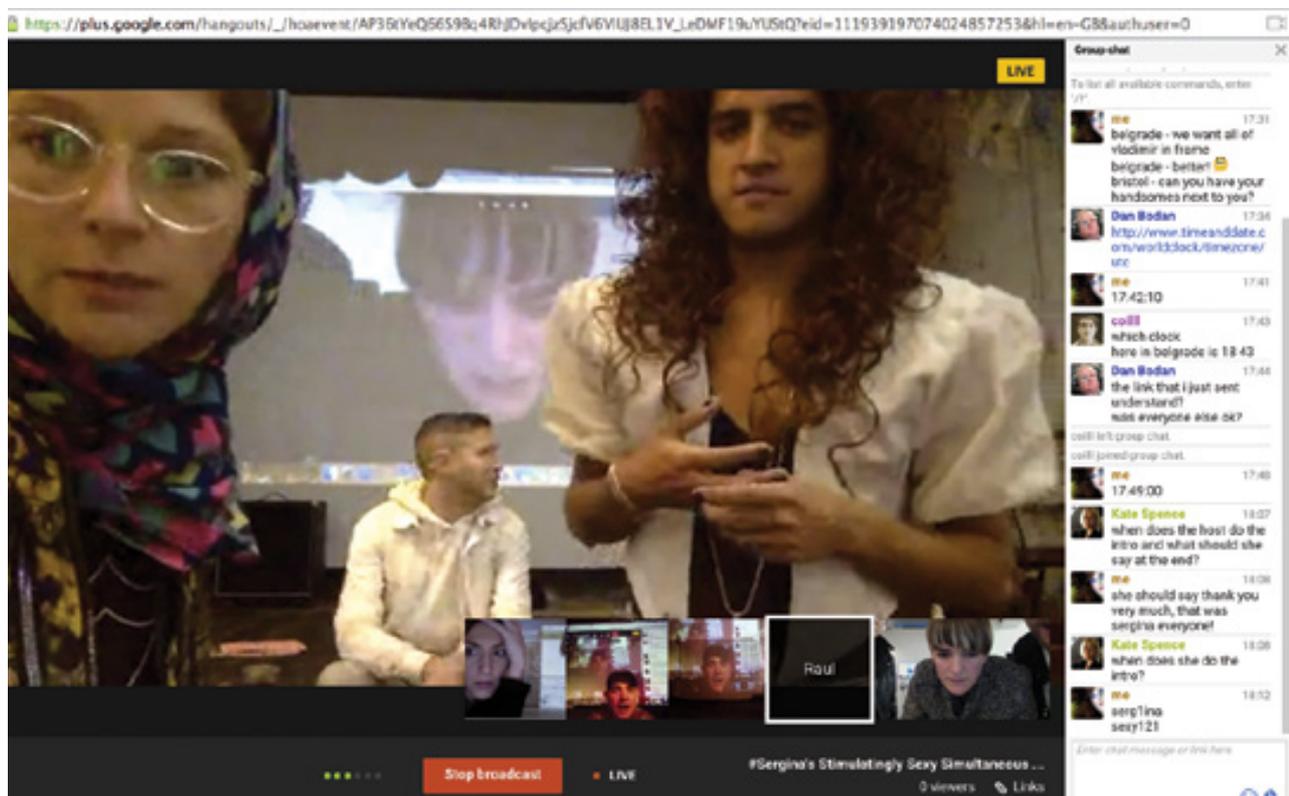


Fig. 3 Screen Shot from Google Hangout Connected Tech Rehearsal before first ever performance of #Sergina's *Stimulatingly Sexy Simultaneous Simulation of Herself* on 11th November 2015, with #Sergina played by Elly Clarke at The Lowry Centre, Salford Quays; Raul de Nieves at Secret Project Robot, Brooklyn; Liz Rosenfeld at Monster Ronson's Ichiban Karaoke, Berlin; Kate Spence at The Island, Bristol and Vladimir Bjelic at G12 Hub in Belgrade.

As debates around AI and robotics relate to ever more aspects of our lives, it isn't a huge leap to wonder whether we might soon be able to do away with our bodies altogether. Stelarc talks about the body's value as being more to do with its connectivity than any organic form or function. Arthur Kroker takes this a step further, suggesting that fleshy physicality is but a figment of the imagination: 'nothing is as imaginary as the material body'.³ However, no matter how many tasks are outsourced to machines, we are – at least for now – stuck with/in our bodies. And these bodies are still charged, and political. Carolee Schneeman states, 'Go back to the body, which is where all the splits in Western Culture occur'.⁴ And it is this tension – the sense that being free of a body would be easier on the one hand (why be in only one place at once; why show your tired face when

you can show a filtered, edited, better-looking, digital version?), and the impossibility of achieving this on the other, (who or what am I without a body?) that I – and #Sergina – like to play with.

By proposing that a single identity need not be confined to a single body, however, a certain type of slippage emerges, regarding agency, context and commodification. I understand narcissism as the engine behind most social media platforms and #Sergina's multi-bodiedness is an attempt to sidestep the capitalist cult of the individual, upon which narcissism depends. Although it is of course a circle: #Sergina is also the very embodiment of self-obsession, of selfie culture: her nails, her hair, her handsome boy entourage needs to be documented and shared – but it brings her back only ever to herself.

The digital image plays an increasingly important role in the creation, performance and presentation of identity – to such a degree that the physical body can find itself overshadowed or upstaged by its omnipresent digital descriptions. Where the digital body flies to people and places unimaginable, the organic body, clunky in its physicality, drags behind: archaic and almost rotten in its inability to be in more than one place at any one time. The digital image allows – and encourages – identity to be plural and promiscuous. Intimacy is dragged up and shared. And meanwhile (as proven by the Cambridge Analytica scandal) our data is understood as our most valuable asset: each individual seen as no more than *an orgy of algorithms*, which un/invited guests are increasingly paying (or not paying) to play (with). And we have to keep up. With each new popular technological development comes the necessity of a revision (upgrade) of concepts and practices of privacy and intimacy, as well as presence and absence, in ways that are personal and political, public and private, state driven and individual.

However, just as the technologies we use feed off us and the data that we generate, and leak, so are we evolving (to) them. The relationship is symbiotic – resulting in A NEVER-ENDING NAVIGATION OF ZEROS AND BUMPING UP AGAINST AN UN/COMFORTABLE ORGY OF THE ABJECT DETRITUS OF PHYSICALITY: CELLS AND BLOOD AND PUS AND BONES AND GRISTLE AND HARD ONS AND EJACULATE AND PISS AND SHIT AND TEARS AND SWEAT AND SKIN.⁵

This is my take on the #digitalphysical hybrid ecology of our existence.

⁵ From a proposal for a performance not yet made entitled *How are you? Proposal for a Physical digital Viral Transference of Identity*, by #Sergina (plural): <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dvJpVP66g9tMVB8JBiq4zVwKIBapu7U-JWV85O1mpgo0/edit?usp=sharing> (accessed 17.1.2018).

DARLINGS, I'M READY FOR MY CLOSEUP



⁶ Magdalena Tyžlik-Carver, 'You're Never Alone With Your Mobile Phone: Experiences of Intimacy', in Pascal Gielen (ed.), *Understanding Territoriality: Identity Place and Possession* (Brighton: Fabrica, 2017), pp. 106–113, https://understandingterritoriality.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/understanding_territoriality_identity_place_posession.pdf (accessed 17.1.2018).

⁷ 'An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions', lecture by #Sergina (plural) with Elly Clarke and Vladimir Bjeličić, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dpA6hlU8Z4> (accessed 17.1.2018).

Moving a finger over the phone screen from one side to the other, stroking a face of a lover or a friend is the same gesture that reveals just how close we are to others and how close we become with things always within our reach.

Magdalena Tyžlik-Carver⁶

For my lecture performance in Munich I wanted to find ways to blur the boundaries and the distinction between what is live and what isn't, by lecturing over (*entlang*) the one I had performed and recorded on (web)camera two weeks earlier with my long-term collaborator Vladimir Bjeličić.⁷ With both versions of this lecture recorded via Google Hangout/YouTube Live, the Munich performance became a kind of repetition (reproduction) of its earlier self, but with four bodies rather than two: two (apparently) live, two recorded. The Munich lecture was a live screenshare of this older lecture woven in with the current Google Hangout with Bjeličić, the action on stage and other things shown by #Sergina on the screen.

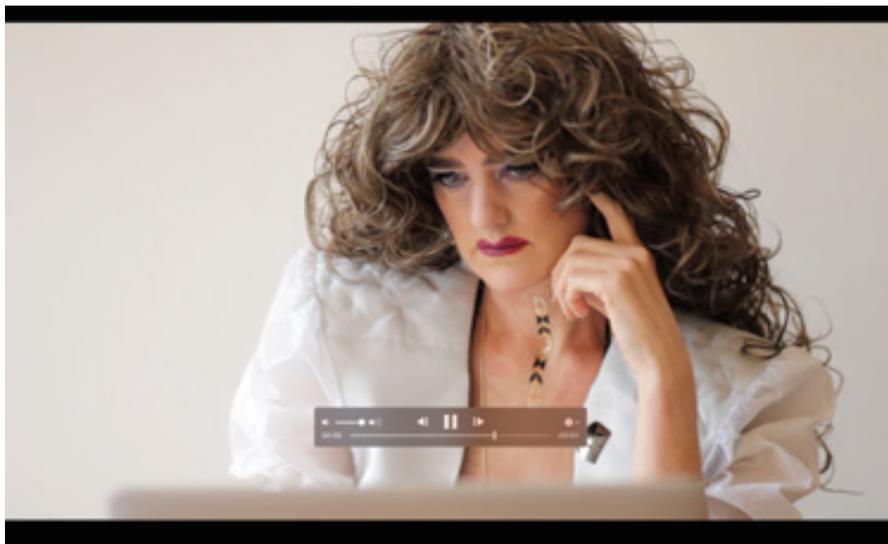


Fig. 4 (opposite page)
Still from live feed of *An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions at Munich Academy of Fine Arts*, showing Vladimir Bjeličić as #Sergina, performing live from Belgrade via Google Hangout, 16th November 2016.

Fig. 5
Still from live feed of *An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions at Munich Academy of Fine Arts*, showing Elly Clarke as #Sergina performing live in Munich, with Frauke Zabel and Judith Neunhäuserer as Handsome Boys, 16th November 2016.

Fig. 6
Still from *An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions: A Love Story To Myself*, performed and filmed simultaneously in Berlin/ Belgrade, 31st October 2016.

Fig. 7
Still from live feed of *An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions at Munich Academy of Fine Arts*, showing Vladimir Bjeličić from pre-recorded video performance *An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions: A Love Story To Myself*, shot in Berlin/ Belgrade, 31st October 2016.

Yesterday was yesterday

Today is now

BOTH: Get it now

Get it - **BOTH:** now

Instantaneous culture

Instantaneous culture

Why want for what you wish for?

Why want for what you wish for?

Instantaneous culture

Instantaneous culture

Why wish for what you want?

Why wish for what you want?

STOP VID: 11'06"

SCREENSHARE STOP

SERGINA (Vladimir):

People are lonely. (Sherry Tuckle)

SERGINA (Elly):

The network is seductive. (Sherry Tuckle)

SERGINA:

We are all cyborgs! (Sherry Tuckle)

SERGINA (Elly)

(reading from paper with phone in front of face:)

Individuals play at being themselves in order to realize themselves, so in a sense, all human beings are performing in front of video monitors or audiences, fictive or real, at all times. What this means for the concept of "self" is that the self does not exist as anything but a dramatic effect. The self others deal with is the image we project into a scene of action, and what is at stake is whether this image will be credited or discredited. (Martha Wilson, Premiere (video) 1972)

SERGINA (Vladimir):

I want you, I want you so bad (Beatles)

4. SERGINA'S COMPLAINT TO SERGINA: I WANT TO SEE YOU FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE Con conversationally

(Elly) I want to see you from a different perspective

can you show me another side?

can I look at you from an alternative angle?

will you stand in a different light?

(Vladimir) Can you change your hair colour, your name and your clothes?

can you alter the way that you stand?

can you vary what you say when you talk - it'll be fun

you'll appear in a different light

Vladimir was at home in Belgrade during the lecture, as he was when we shot the video; I was in Berlin for the video, in Munich for the performance. As with all #Sergina's simultaneous networked performances to date, both Bjeličić and I were wearing the same outfit (designed by Berlin-based Patricia Muriale⁸), and the same makeup and wigs, following a script based on #Sergina's song texts edited collaboratively via Google Docs.⁹ Comments came back that the audience was unsure whether Vladimir was a second person at all (it could have been voice altering tech and different makeup), and if so, whether s/he was truly physically present (online) in that same moment or not.

⁸ Patricia Muriale designed #Sergina's costume for the first edition of #Sergina's *Stimulatingly Sexy Simultaneous Simulation of Herself*, commissioned by the Lowry in Salford Quays in collaboration with Birmingham Open Media and SHOUT festival, performed at the opening night of digital art exhibition *Right Here Right Now* and simultaneously at Monster Ronson's Ichiban Karaoke in Berlin (with Liz Rosenfeld), at the G12 Hub in Belgrade (with Vladimir Bjeličić), at the Secret Project Robot Art Experiment in Brooklyn (with Raul de Nieves) and at the Island Theatre in Bristol (with Kate Spence), plus Handsome Boys and Tech Girls of any gender in each location. The performance has since been repeated three more times, taking on new cities, with new performers (Thomas Doherty and Katy Pendlebury) and new songs.

⁹ 'Munich Lecture', take 2: Google Docs script as performed at the Munich Academy of Arts, November 2016, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/19SG0QLK73nXQX0HfBC8blnR-2Cp8AGnmFXc65W8CMB0/edit?usp=sharing> (accessed 17.1.2018).



Fig. 8 (opposite page)
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Fig. 9
Still from live feed of *An Orgy of Algorithms and Other Desires and Distractions at Munich Academy of Fine Arts*, showing Elly Clarke (in Munich) and Vladimir Bjeličić (in Belgrade), 2016–17.

Fig. 10
Still from (YouTube archive of) live feed of #Sergina's *Stimulatingly Sexy Simultaneous Simulation of Herself at The Marlborough and Places Beginning with B*, showing Vladimir Bjeličić (in Belgrade); Elly Clarke (at The Marlborough Theatre in Brighton); Thomas Doherty (in Berlin) and Katy Pendlebury (in Brighton), 17th September 2017.



Fig. 11

An Orgy of Algorithms: The Collapse, performance still mobile phone photo, which was taken and instantaneously uploaded to @serg1na's Instagram account by Handsome Boy Frauke Zabel.