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Transformed Bodies:

The Challenge of Changing

I would like to speak about thinkable forms of transformation of bodies. It is a very complex theme, and so I decided to take three concrete examples to illustrate what "transformed bodies" could mean. I hope to encourage you to get into a discussion about challenges and risks of transformation and raise awareness of your own borders that you might be unwilling or unable to cross over.

TRANSFORMATION AND BODY

Transformation has something to do with change – more or less radical change – and with opening new spaces. When something is being transformed it gets another quality – hopefully a better or more complete one. So we have (at least) two states – one before and one after the transformation. But what is more exciting is the question what is happening with something (in our case with the body) during the process of transformation. This is the question for the reason of starting a process of transformation and also about the driving force. How does something change? Can you recognize it after the transformation? Is there, for example, a part or an essence, an identity perhaps, that does not change, that stays the same?

There is a scheme for examination: What is the starting point of the transformation-process ("transformation from what")? Why is it or why is it necessary ("transformation for what")? What is the state reached at the end or the aim ("transformation into what")? Such characterizations can start the discussion about challenges and risks of the process of transformation.

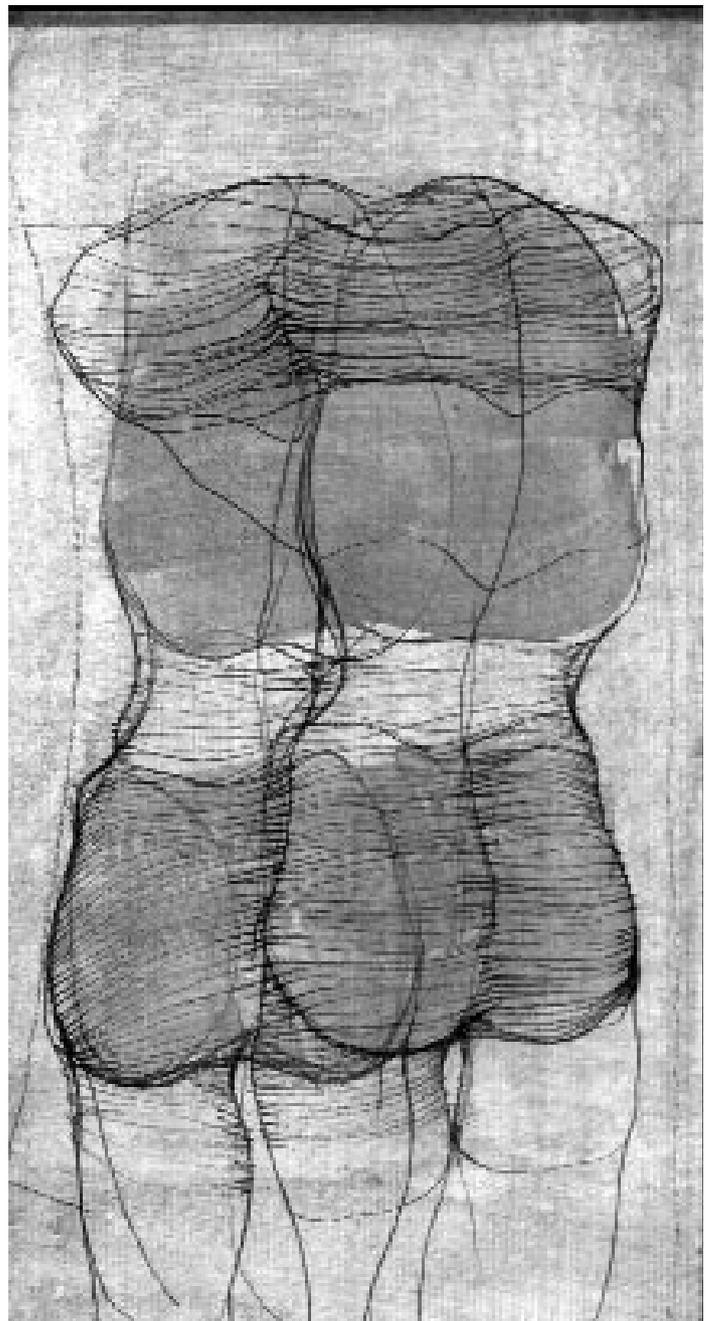
There are two things which are important for me if I speak about the body. First, thinking about our bodies has really a theological meaning. And second, our body – our skin, senses, movement – is our entrance to the world; we do not have any other ways of communicating than through our bodies. "Transformation of body" can be illustrated in three parts. After a theological part (concerning resurrection) there will follow two very different examples of changing bodies, both in a quite radical way. The first example is Stelarc, an Australian performance artist who works with his body in the field of Cyborg-existence; the second example will be transgender (or more exactly transsexual) identity.

RESURRECTION – TRANSFORMATION OF OUR BODIES IN DEATH

The resurrection or rising of our bodies is probably the most radical transformation we can think about. The imagination of a resurrection of our bodies presents a paradox. On the one hand our death is really an end and therefore something radically new; a life after death is a totally different kind of existence than life here on earth. On the other hand, resurrection suggests a continuity of our life in death. So far, the dying and

the rising body have the same identity. We have a radical change or transformation of our mortal body in death and at the same time a preservation of our bodies because of the preservation of our identity. Paul gives a description of this dilemma in a famous New Testament text: 1. Corinthians 15, 35-49.

In this text, Paul gives a picture of a seed. With this picture he strongly emphasizes the discontinuity or discrepancy between the dying and the rising person: *"The seed you sow*



does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be, but a naked grain." But in the same moment Paul speaks about the continuation between dying and rising, too, when he says that God will give it a new body, after it died. It is the same "it" – in the "animal" as well as in the "spiritual" body. The body around will change, not the "it". The conclusion is that we have to think about the transformation in death in the way that there is continuity and discontinuity, identity and newness with the same grade of importance. Death is the most radical change of our existence, it is a complete and radical change of our bodies – but still of *our* bodies. I will rise with my body (my identity) – you will rise with your body. Even in death it is non-interchangeable.

But how is this imaginable? Another text from Paul explains. It is in Romans 8, 11, *"Moreover, if the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, then the God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give new life to your mortal bodies through God's indwelling Spirit"*. This is a key to the understanding of the transformation in the resurrection. The question is: in which way is there something which keeps the living and the power in all loosening and transformation of the dying body? Back to the picture: If the seed would really die in a literal sense then it would not be able to produce a plant or a fruit. But it is able to – it becomes a plant, thus far it gets a new body.

How does this happen? How can we imagine this process of transformation? Paul gives the answer: It is not a part of our body which stays alive and gives new life while the other parts are dying (so it is not a part of the seed). The whole body dies and the whole body stays alive. It is God who gives the mortal body of the human being new life with God's Spirit, which dwells inside our bodies (Romans 8:11). The Spirit of God is the connection between our mortal body ("animal body") which will die and our spiritual body which will live forever. With this Spirit inside and outside us, we can overcome the paradox or the dilemma of continuity and discontinuity of our body in death.

What Paul wants to explain is the quality of transformation of our bodies in death. It is the transformation from the mortal animal body into the immortal spiritual body – both are the same and totally different. The connection is the presence of God's Spirit within us (within our bodies). The spirit of God is the principle of life which survives death. Because it is embodied in our human mortal bodies already now, we are connected with God beyond death. But to get in a final state, there must be a radical change of the old (the mortal body or flesh or the seed or the animal body – whatever you want) to give the space for newness (for the spiritual body or the plant). And nothing is more radical than death.

STELARC – EXTENDING AND ENHANCING THE OBSOLETE BODY

A very different form of transformation of the body is postulated by the Australian performance artist STELARC. Transformation of the body in his context means to extend and enhance our obsolete and imperfect bodies. STELARC was born in Limassol (Cyprus) but moved to Australia when he was 18 years old, where he studied Arts and Crafts at Melbourne University. STELARC is interested in the change (or transformation) of natural human body into Cyborg-existence. His work explores the concept of the body with technology through

human-machine interfaces, using technical help like the Internet and Web, sound, music, video and computers. He always works with his own body as a medium, so in his person he is both artist and artwork.

He has been extending his body through performances since the late 1960s, sometimes with a high risk of getting hurt and with much pain. In one of his last performances he connected his body to electrodes and computers with the Internet. So, from different places people could move STELARC's body (his arms, legs, even his head) via the Internet. Before that his performances included attaching a "Third Hand" to his body, which is movable not with mechanical power but through his nerves and brain. Over twenty-five times he made so called "suspension"-events where he hung his entire body from hooks piercing his skin.

What is the philosophy behind this? In an interview he explains his suspension-performance, "in the past, we have considered the skin as surface, as interface. The skin has been a boundary for the soul, for the self. Once technology stretches and pierces the skin, the skin as a barrier is erased." With his experiments or body-performances he wants to show the psychological and physical limitations of the body, and that we are able to develop strategies for extending and enhancing this limitations through technology. STELARC said, "the important thing for me is to extend the body with cyber-systems and see what it can actually do." STELARC is convinced that it is necessary to redesign our imperfect and obsolete bodies. Our body is biologically inadequate if we get conscious that we live in a high-technology and multimedia information age. For STELARC, our body is impersonal, an objective structure, which has to be radically changed or redesigned to get space for a really new thinking or for really new philosophies.

As he emphasizes, STELARC does not have a utopian perfect body. But he wants to open a process of changing the body because the body has become profoundly obsolete in the created, intense information environment. He wants to show that we are able to extend our bodies (for example to have three arms instead of two) and that we are able to widen our sensibilities and our perception.

Through STELARC's work, we reach a second level of existence where the body becomes the object for physical and technical experiments in order to discover its limitations. When he speaks of the "obsolete body" STELARC means that the body must overcome centuries of prejudices and begin to be considered as an extensible evolutionary structure, enhanced with the most disparate technologies that are more precise, accurate and powerful. So STELARC said, "technology is what defines the meaning of being human, it is part of being human."

TRANSEXUALS – EXCHANGING THE WRONG BODY INTO THE RIGHT ONE

The final example of body-transformation looks at the body-transformation of transgender, or more precisely, transsexual people. Again this is a form of transformation of the real body. Transsexual people consider themselves to be of a gender different to the one whose physical characteristics they were born with (or they were assigned with after birth, in the case of children born intersex). I speak here about people who wish and seriously act upon the sense of having the wrong gender-body. There are male-to-female transsexuals (they were born with a male body but consider themselves to be a

woman) and female-to-male transsexuals. This indicates that it seems to be possible to be or to live in a wrong body, or in the right body but with the wrong sex or gender.

Imagine that the body you have does not fit your gender identity. What would you do? The transformation in this case has the quality of correcting something or coming to what you are. To change their bodies is not a whimsical or crazy idea for transsexuals but an absolutely necessary liberation step to get out of a very painful trap and – most importantly – to become one person in mind and body. But, if transsexuals decide really to change their body physically and to alter their gender, it is very hard and again painful. And of course it is an enormous, radical change.

The operative sex change (Sexual Reassignment Surgery, SRS) is a rough interference in the body. For male-to-female transsexuals, it usually involves amputation of testicles and most of the penis, inversion of the penis skin into a vagina, and optional breast implants. For female-to-male transsexuals it involves mastectomy, hysterectomy and optional attempts at creating a penis and scrotum. Before and after surgery a long hormonal treatment is necessary. The stories of transsexual people (how they change their bodies, which surgery they have done, their degree of pressure before) are very different. But in spite of physical pain, most of them describe the process of transformation into the right body as a way of healing and becoming a full person.

GAINING ANOTHER QUALITY

Summarizing thoughts about “transformation”, I refer back to the beginning where I give you the scheme: starting point (“from what”) – process and driving force (“for what”) – end and aim (“into what”). How was it in the three given examples?

Resurrection: The starting point is positive and negative: our good body (creation: “And God saw it was good”) but also sinful body. Paradox: Already died but not finally risen. The

process: final and most radical transformation with the quality of saving our lives. The end: Nothing negative remained. Finally a risen body or a spiritual body or full participation in God’s glory.

STELARC: The starting point is a negative state: our imperfect and obsolete body; the only good thing: the body is a “good material” for changing. The process: Quality of enhancing and extending our bodies with using our brains. The end: Positive (STELARC)? “Cyborg-bodies” or “modern bodies” relating to the world today; chance to produce new humankind (new ideas and philosophies).

Transsexuals: The starting point is only negative: a wrong gender-body. The process: exchanging or reassignment of gender with the quality of healing. The end: full personality; identity of body and mind; right gender-feeling.

For all three processes it stays important that through the transformation something gains another quality. The biggest challenge and chance I see in transformation processes is to open space for something really new and to dare to bring yourself into a process of changing. Where are the risks and where should there be limits – we can discuss this further referring to the three given examples.

Suggested Readings:

HÄRLE Wilfried, *Dogmatik*. Berlin, 1995. 554ff.

WWW.STANFORD.ED/DEPT/HPS/STELARC/A29-EXTENDED_BODY.HTML

Katrin ROGGE is 51 years old. After school she lived for a year in Israel (in the Christian kibbutz Nes Ammim). There she decided to study theology, which she did in Heidelberg and Berlin. Her main interests are feminist and liberation theology, Jewish-Christian dialogue and gender issues. Since March 1999 she works for the German SCM (ESG) in the office in Berlin as a theologian. Her subjects are theology, university affairs, gender issues, lesbian and gay people. This essay is adapted from her lecture at the WSCF Europe Gender and Education Conference in Amsterdam, in April 2002.

