In this paper, I claim that the acoustical accident at the Utzon Centre reveals that Stelarc’s Internet Ear is an ‘ontological theatre’ with post-digital cultural significance. From the acoustical accident emerge two otherwise dislocated cultural patterns simply by staging their collision. An ethical-rational pattern setting up boundaries for post-digital ‘practices’; and an experimental/border-crossing pattern seeking out new technological sensibilities.

The Ear on Arm...

Let me begin by explaining Stelarc’s work, Internet Ear. Its pretext is another closely related project by Stelarc, Ear on Arm. In this project, and by means of a lengthy surgical process, Stelarc had an artificial human ear implanted in his forearm. A subsequent operation then installed microscopic electronic equipment in this third ear, with a view to both transmitting and receiving sound. Because of the danger of possible infection it was impossible to give the ear a technological “sense of hearing” and the equipment was removed. But the ear is still attached to Stelarc’s arm, however unconnected.

Internet Ear, which was commissioned for the Biotopia exhibition, launches the Ear on Arm project onto the Internet. Software and the Internet transform Internet Ear into a listening arm. You can listen along with it from (and to) Moscow or Paris, or whatever corner of the globe you happen to be in. Stelarc’s Internet Ear has its own blog (www.earonarm.net), where anyone can contribute to the ear’s dialogue with itself.

By speaking into the ear on the arm, your voice will be heard and seen as text projected in the other locations and also accessed on the Ear On Arm website. Webcams will monitor each location and image the interactions on the website. The result will be a looping cacophony of modulated voices and projected text, ebbing and flowing in density and intensity over different time zones: “The global installation will not be about explicit exchanges, but rather about acoustical affect and ephemeral text.” [1]

Internet Ear is an exploration of technological sensuality and the technology of the senses. It is conceptualized as an open channel for listening to the world, a fusion of human being and machine, biology and bytes. What this paper shows, however, is that this intention is not fully realised until the Internet Ear becomes a medium for the Danish Ethical Council meeting on November 10, 2010. This is also the case when it comes to the other intended and salient factor at work in Ear on Arm, as Stelarc himself explains: “The exploration of technological sensuality becomes a distributed and expanded sensuality; a sensual technology disconnected from its original ‘host’ and, in principal, beyond its control” [2].

Furthermore, we are able to hear global interaction with Stelarc’s ear in the ‘cloud’: “Internet Ear is an installation that … will be simultaneously an intimate and extended interaction that explores the dynamics of sound as a globally circulating and connecting experience”. [1] Stelarc seems to be pointing towards a phenomenology based upon the body as a distributed entity. It becomes, is, a feedback system of experienced sounds.

This relation of body and sound is ‘acted out’ through the computer as a real-time telematic medium reminiscent of Peter Weibel’s analysis of our artificial eye as the receptor of ‘intelligent images’ beyond the reach of our bodily-based senses. As he writes, “With our receptors, we are able to go beyond our border; we see something beyond our own body, and we have invented hundreds of telematic machines that go much further than our natural sensory organs can go, and have a much larger horizon of visibility than the horizon of things that we can see and process” [3].

Stelarc’s practice points towards some interesting ways in which the relation of remote bodies and sound can be ‘instru-
mentalized – not only in the attempt to move aesthetic production beyond the ‘reservation of art’, but also because it really becomes a feedback system of ethical issues concerning the body, with regard to questions around how far we should go to keep it healthy or, rather, up to speed with technology. The Internet Ear is, in fact, an embodiment of scientific knowledge, as Stjernfelt and May has argued:

“Technology becomes in general a corporeal rooting and embodiment of scientific knowledge and the instrument becomes an interface in which this actor meets his theoretical constituted objects in the form of observations on a kind of ‘externalized retina.’ In a fundamental sense the technical interface thus constitutes the body’s own experienced boundary with the world, but projected towards us like a screen” [4].

In the case of Internet Ear, of course, we encounter the externalized eardrum rather than the externalized retina. I find that the final passage of this quote fits very well into a description of the Internet Ear. The cast of the Ear on Arm is clearly an aesthetic expression of an experienced boundary with the world; moreover, this boundary is projected to us – perhaps not like a screen – but as texts on a screen. Ephemeral texts, clouded texts, texts generated by the voice-to-text generator, and as feed back of generated voices and texts.

The Ontological Theatre

In his recent work, Andrew Pickering introduces the notion of an ‘ontological theatre’, which is closely connected to his idea about the ‘performativ’ brain [5]. According to Pickering there is a layer of interpretation that creates a connection beyond the work of art. This layer has something to do with ontology.

The western tradition is an ontological theatre for Cartesian dualisms, an asymmetric ontological picture dominated by sight and cognition – we know the world through our senses. This leads to an ontological poetics.

But, according to Pickering, the world is not dualist. The Cartesian dualisms conceal what takes place in the laboratory, which is material in action, on the level of performance. The scientist and material perform a dance of agency. The laboratory creates an ‘intimate, performance engagement’. Or: a ‘decentered dance of agency’, as Pickering formulates it [6]. Thus, the world, according to Pickering, is a place of ‘decentered, ontological becoming’ with a ‘dualist unconsciousness’ at play [7].

It is possible, therefore, to speak about a kind of ‘agency-realism’, which is the true status of the ‘ontological theatre’ where the dualist unconsciousness is being acted out. Thus, behind the notion of the ontological theatre lies ‘the general idea of the material world as lively and unpredictable’ [8].

At this point it should be clarified that my argument, which is building on the insights and concepts of Pickering, grows further based on the assumption that the acoustical accident, quite literally, moves the ‘dance of agency’ of the laboratory condition of the Internet Ear (and the Ear on Arm as well) outside the laboratory. Or, rather, it causes the laboratory condition to collide with real-life issues from outside the art gallery. It becomes an ear in the cloud when that happens – and to say more about this, new, condition I have found Pickering’s notion about the ‘ontological theatre’ helpful.

According to Pickering, the ontological theatre stages the uncontrollable becoming of things that are otherwise being held down by the dualist ontology [9]. Art can be extracted from lively systems, according to Pickering. From this notion, there is a very short step to stating that Stelarc is in fact staging and performing human agency in his laboratory. Humans are performers rather than thinkers. The focus, therefore, is on agency rather than on cognition.

Internet Ear ventures into a controversial area, not only because it stages an attempt to fuse the human body with technology, but because the piece re-loads aesthetics conventionally belonging to art into an area conventionally belonging to science.

Thus, the Internet Ear becomes the stage of an important scene in the ontological theatre of human knowledge and cognition – the instance when the body itself becomes a fragmented and distributed entity, data on a medical health card for a physician to interpret.

The Cloud

The Danish Ethical Council Meeting – November 10, Utzon Centre, Aalborg, Denmark

According to the summary found on the Ethical Council’s webpage, the meeting in the Danish Ethical Council was debating the issue of a shared health-card, and whether the sharing of information across platforms and in a distributed environment should be limited or tained. The context of the issue debated is a society where computing and computers are everywhere and affects everybody. Among computer-and web developers, the Internet is increasingly seen as a ‘semantic web’ – popularly referred to as ‘cloud computing’ [10].

‘Cloud computing’ is a concept that attempts to describe the configuration of next-generation Internet technology [11]. This introduces a range of new opportunities for ‘common-coding’ (or what is also called tagging) and collaboration across the platform and protocols. The innovative idea of cloud computing is that anything, in Weinberger’s words, ‘is ‘miscellaneous’, yet Traceable tagged in Context’. This means that although there is so much data, nothing in principle makes itself particularly noticed in itself and can be found in one simple search, so it can be found (and becomes visible) in specially tagged contexts. [12] New technologies such as Echonest gives us an unprecedented opportunity to ‘track’ sequences and identify ‘hidden’ content in large data volumes, also called ‘emergent’ methodologies. These emergent methodologies are not only technologically driven, but based on more people working together, and they point towards collaborative and transdisciplinary semantics for content production among a distributed audience [13].

With the emergent methodologies of digital technologies available today, you never know when you may accidently access or eavesdrop on other people’s conversations. The event of ‘eavesdropping’ is therefore not an unforeseeable accident, but more likely the result of a collision of cultural patterns created by an emergent distributed public in a ‘cloud’ of accessible data.

The Internet Ear addresses the conditions of a ‘cloud culture’ where data and communications in a distributed public are ‘tagged’ in a context where no ‘real’ cultural conversation is taking place outside that distributed public space. The acoustical accident stages the Internet Ear between two opposing positions in the world’s ontological theatre: The speculative/dualist and the experimental / laboratoria.

Colling Realties

Internet Ear stages (as an ontological theatre) a ‘process of exteriorization’, but a process in which an outer part of a physical organ of the body is operated into another part of the same body. I claim that this creates, in the first instance, a sense of dislocation. The very
idea that the physical organ is changing its location on the body, the ear has metaphorically moved to the arm, creates the situation where the ear as an exteriorized sense organ becomes the center of scrutiny and observation.

In the second instance, it points towards another process wherein the abstraction of sensing an external world achieves physical existence due to the intervention of technology: Text.

2010-11-10 12:43:02, Aalborg: counties by a commission
2010-11-10 12:43:10, Aalborg: Moscow come a long
2010-11-10 12:51:52, Aalborg: tough time in the
2010-11-10 12:51:56, Aalborg: valley have to leave the healing like it or
2010-11-10 12:52:02, Aalborg: where they saw a list of
2010-11-10 12:52:10, Aalborg: minutes of fame
2010-11-10 12:52:19, Aalborg: feeling here is really
2010-11-10 12:52:23, Aalborg: knows what will
2010-11-10 12:52:29, Aalborg: win the respect of ways
[14]

Both visible and audible, the text materializing from the dislocated ear has many implications. Note, for instance, the relics of what may well be a discussion about the notion of the ‘uncanny valley’ (the notion formulated by robot scientists which explains why the semblance of a robot to humans becomes uncanny when that semblance becomes too realistic) [15]. Resembling something in between absurd theatre à la Beckett and coded data, the textualizations of the acoustic accident can be seen as yet another element in the process of exteriorization.

This could be compared to concrete poetry as well; however, except in cases where people write directly into the prompt on the site, there is no human control involved at all. Even then, the text generated by the human, even though it may be more legible in a literal sense, becomes easily disturbed and dislocated from any contextual meaning in the flow of generated text coming from the Internet Ears located all over the world.

This ‘dislocated’ text is addressing the human-computer relation, which, even though it is distributed through the cloud, is using the cloud of semantic and tagged data to reach a different world.

The clouded texts appearing from the acoustic accident reveal an algorithm of dislocated patterns of cultural identities reloaded through the actions of a sentient body-fragment.

**Ear in the Cloud**

My claim in this paper is that (drawing on the concepts from Pickering) the acoustical accident at the Utzon Centre is a case of ‘agency realism’ being acted out. Moreover, I claim that the accident reveals that Stelarc’s Internet Ear is an ‘ontological theatre’ – and because of the accident, it is being acted out in real life and in real time in Utzon Centre, November 10, 2010.

From the acoustical accident, then, emerge the ‘ontological theatre’ and some critical new levels of technological sensibility that would otherwise have remained dormant in Stelarc’s Internet Ear. As a result of the accident, therefore, the Internet Ear emerges as the ear in the cloud it was intended to be.

**References**

2. Stelarc [1].
7. Pickering [6].
8. Pickering [6].
9. Stelarc [1].
11. Leadbeater [10].