JOHN A DOUGLAS

BODY FLUID - THE SEVEN CYCLES
John A Douglas transforms and ritualises the act of his daily dialysis treatment to produce a reflection on the
cyborgian/augmented body, mortality, and the implications of life-support technology.

The Seven Cycles serves as an extension of a previous body of live performance work, Body Fluid II. The 10-hour
performance installation featured the artist carrying out the process of dialysis while completely enclosed within
a golden body suit, left blind and staggering. Elements of 1970s endurance art and the abject are present as we
are directly confronted with corporeal functions of waste and cleansing in the form of an extended meditation.

Moving from the realm of live performance to video artwork, the body and the ritual experience a transformation.
Removed from the physical realm, Douglas’ ritual is no longer ephemeral in nature. The ritual has been recorded,
recontextualised and immortalised as a video artwork on loop, echoing the artist’s daily repetition. During the
performances a dialysis machine was visibly present, however within this exhibition the machine is noticeably
absent. Instead, the body undergoes a preservative process using an entirely different machine, a camera.

Douglas’ video works are undeniably filmic, employing a mise-en-scène characteristic of cinema. Bazin suggests
that the acts of photography and filmmaking are akin to the ancient Egyptian act of mumification “the religion
of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal
body. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time.” Under this definition,
the process of dialysis shares the same goal of mumification, preserving the corporeal body from the effects
of time. Douglas’ golden man even bears a resemblance to a mummified body, blinded and covered from head to
toe. The figure also bears resemblance to another ‘preserved’ organism, the cyborg. In Douglas’ golden man we
see a true cyborg, a being that symbiotically blends the biological and the artificial. We see echoes of fictional
cyborgs, like the mechanised Maria from Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927). But unlike the utopian, superhuman
cyborgs traditionally seen in film, Douglas’ golden man declasses the image of the cyborgian or augmented body.
This robotic, ‘enhanced’ body appears against barren, waterless landscapes – trudging, struggling and collapsing,
though persevering regardless. The body is not depicted as rigid and metallic, but instead is shown to be fleshy,
liquid, and corporeal. Through this debasement of the cyborg body, we begin to question the implications of life-
supporting/preservative technology–the body is preserved, but at what cost?

It is only when the condition is ritualised in Levitation that this cyborgian body transcends the boundaries of
the human form. Douglas’ golden man lies on an altar of sorts. Dialysis tube on exhibition, it is as if through
this process of cleansing and replenishment, the body is granted the power of levitation. When the procedure is
ritualised, the artist’s daily act of repetition is transformed instead into a transcendent meditation.