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Twists of the smart body

Biohacks of biometric existence

Fig. 1: sx-fluid bodysuit, 2022, Cristina Dezi at Espacio Open artistic residency Bilbao

What does it mean to be human – what does it mean to be, do, and know – if the principal means for understanding and organising society is data?

This entry maps this question by parsing the existential ethos and value of artistic biohacking practices. As a point of departure, it discusses how biometric AI reshuffles and reduces existence when posited as a mechanism, symptom, and prism of the unlimited belief that data-based technology is more accurate, efficient, and reliable than human knowledge. Conceptualizing biometrics as existential media of the »digital limit situation«, offers ways to think critically about media as media of limits (Lagerkvist, 2022). This raises a wider epistemological critique of hegemonic, metric ways of knowing, which can be furthered through the case of biohacking, since it presents a potential to rethink biometrics and ethics through ›queerness‹. As will be argued in this essay, biohacking can limit datafication by engaging sensuous knowledge as a mode of respons(e)ability.

To flesh out these limits of measurement and to provide an alternative, the idea will be put forward that our bodies provide us with our perspective upon the world and serve as a sense-making lens – or rather with sensuous knowledge of the head and knowledge of the gut – for joining the open-ended normative practice of ›living well‹ and for limiting datafication as a knowledge regime. While keenly oriented to recent tides of theorization in media and feminist STS theory, the essay rests upon an existential-ethical framework (which will be defined as ›relational existentialism‹) that conceives of the situated, embodied human being as singular and irreducible, yet ethically responsible due to their condition of vulnerable relationality. The argument will be developed along two cases that explore today's data politics in and through the body, based on participating in the public biohacking workshop Genital (*) Panic by artist Mary Maggic at Kersnikova Institute, Ljubljana in October 2022, and the ongoing conversation with the collective BruiXes_Lab about their politics and practice.[1]

Unbounded data: databodies at the limit

Biometric AI is the technology and growing industry to measure life through, e.g., facial or voice recognition, with the aim to authenticate and identify individuals (Ajana, 2013). It functions based on machine-learning algorithms, by digitizing – thus, compartmentalizing and solidifying – the living, volatile body, which is then accessed and nailed to an identity through existing databases. A social critique against biometrics highlights that the biases coded into the technology structurally reproduce social injustices. An existential analysis expands these concerns by emphasizing the biometric objectification of the existential – the living body (Lagerkvist et al., 2022).

Biometrics claim that identity can objectively be determined through the body (Ajana, 2010); by indexing the body against life as situated, identity is solidified in order to be classified, and thereby, objectified. Btihaj Ajana describes this logic as a »reversed Cartesian Dualism«, insofar as »biometrics gives the body unprecedented relevance over the mind« (ibid.: 154). Further she posits that this reversal is felt in the flesh – that biometric objectification is, hence, an existential breach, as biometrics equalise being and data to the »point at which data recombine into an identity in the ›concrete‹, ›corporeal‹ [...] reality« (ibid.: 248).

Descartes famously defined reason as the essence of being human, presuming a separation between human consciousness, and the body as its material extension. This dualist perception of the human is deeply ingrained in today's algorithms and underlies »dataism« (van Dijck, 2014) as an ideology and governmentality based in the belief that all worthy knowledge is rational and that data is our essence. Pervasive datafication means the mining of our most intimate experiences for the »capitalization of life without limit« (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). These »limitless extractions« (Couldry and Mejias, 2020) perform the idea that calculable reasoning is the only way to explain reality, whereby data become both the source and the product of knowledge, reduced to a quantifiable power to be possessed in vast amounts (Salami, 2020). Thereby the collection of unbounded data transforms into a principle that rules over life by neglecting lived experience. This stresses the pivotal role media technologies play in today's interrelated crises of war, disease and climate change, and highlights the need to relocate the human both onto-ethico-epistemologically and socio-politically as »co-existers« (Lagerkvist, 2022) – differently situated along power asymmetries, yet united in their condition of vulnerable relationality.

For doing so, I argue, that the ›relational existentialism‹ put forward by Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, Karl Jaspers, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler provides a solid

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base. Such existential-ethical framework maintains the classic existentialist view of the human as differently situated, unique and mortal while it conceives of autonomy and subjectivity as indebted to our vulnerable relationality (Lagerkvist et al., 2022). Human existence is defined by its vulnerability and finitude due to its embodiment, a singular-plural, intracorporeal mode of being and doing that unites rational and intuitive knowledges in ways that exceed final comprehension, because it is always already related to others, tools and the inhabited world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013, Nancy, 2000). Thus, it is subjected to contradictions, inconsistencies, and experiences of uncertainty; it is fallible (Jaspers, 1956/2013). Yet, human existence is conditioned to make choices. Being human, means both having and being a body before ›other bodies‹ in shared vulnerability (Butler, 2004, Bost, 2008, Beauvoir, 2018) – therefore it means being obliged to act on the suffering of others (Levinas, 1979). It means being ethically »response-able«, available to ethically respond without circumstantial certainty (Martin et al., 2015). Human subjectivity is, thus, an emergent and ambiguous relational process which stands in sharp contrast to the universal fabrication of men as absolute – a free, independent, unwounded and certain Human separate and superior to everything and everyone lacking these attributes. However, as much as the quest for living well requires deconstructing such a universal »liberal humanist subject« that is implicated in and through socio-technical systems (e.g., Hayles, 2000); an ethics in the sense of responsible action when facing the other (Levinas, 1979) is critically entangled with universal existential traits such as care, finitude and communication (Jaspers, 1956/2013). The question of how to account for each singular human in a media age, thus, suggests to reconceive of media existentially; as powers which condition life by reflecting our technological entanglements while confronting us with our limits: our situated, embodied and mortal existence (Lagerkvist, 2022, Lagerkvist, 2020, Lagerkvist, 2017).

Therefore, existential media theory reconceives of living with data as an ethical quest to reintroduce limits to datafication, by reconfiguring media life from its margins, and, by highlighting that media embed digital limit situations, moments of utter uncertainty which impede sovereign decision-making and yet oblige us to take charge (Lagerkvist, 2017). Such characterize our time insofar as it has transformed into a digital limit situation in itself.

Ambiguous data: sensitizing digital existence

As limits may be transformative, repositing them at the very center of our precariously datafied present suggests reclaiming a knowledge imaginary beyond calculation, inclusive of a variety of modes.

It suggests a different story.

This story is by no means new. Philosophies around the globe refer to it as practical wisdom, meaning an experience- and practice-based type of wisdom relevant to situated encounters. Yet, the Yoruban epos about Ife, retold by feminist author Minna Salami (2020), manifests *ogbon* through mythology, a sensuous way of knowing that is central to this story. It divides ogbon, practical wisdom, into knowledge of the head and knowledge of the gut, and teaches that »to have only one type of knowledge means to be only partly wise« (ibid.: 12). Intellectual and sensuous, emotional, embodied intelligence as »two sides of one coin of knowledge« (ibid.) underline the ambiguity of data as a knowledge device.

Biohacking mobilizes that ambiguity by reassessing biometrics through such existential means. Biohacking can be defined as the exploration of the relation between computation and embodied existence by incorporating technology. This definition addresses other motivations, practices and purposes than those associated with transhumanism. Transhumanists seek to transcend ageing, disease and eventually death by configuring a disembodied, technologically enhanced self, and thus, by completing the mind-body split neglect vulnerability (Åsberg and Neimanis, 2013) and is therefore incompatible with existential
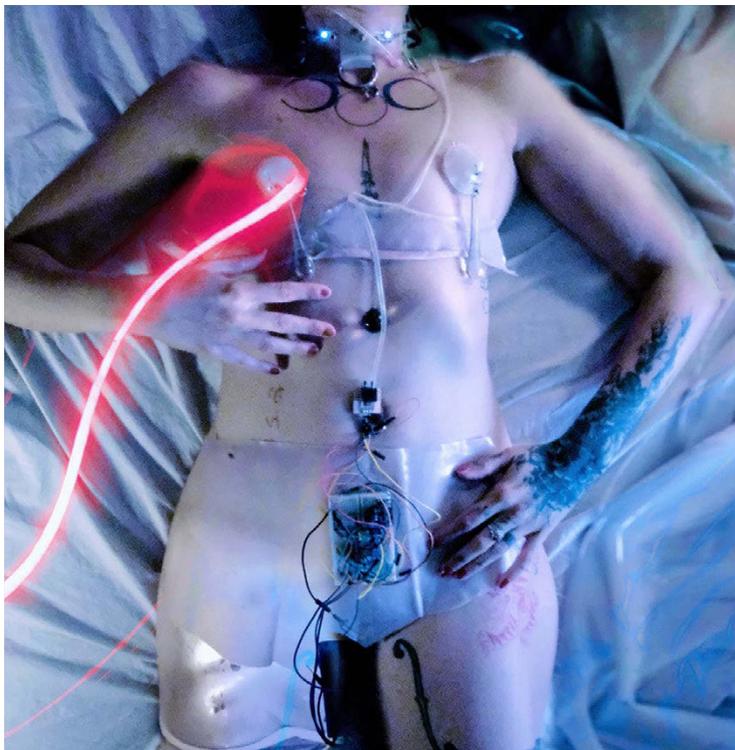
Fig. 2: Bruixes_Lab workshop, 2023, Cristina Dezi

Fig. 3: Bruixes_Lab workshop, 2023, Cristina Dezi

Fig. 4: Bruixes_Lab workshop, 2023, Cristina Dezi

values. In line with existential media theory, biohacking can instead be located as an experience-based learning about the situated, embodied, vulnerable and entangled human being that co-emerges with the world.

Such existential twists of biohacking are present at the fringes of data society, and they are undertaken by non-normative bodies belonging to marginalized groups. A domain that addresses this techno-politics is art. And art is an existential technique: a method to develop and disclose perceptive sensitivities for the human condition in a particular moment of time. Through art we make sense of the immeasurable, and contemporary artists increasingly do so by mediating on existential media critique. The works below illustrate how biohacking and artistic practices (e)merge as ›worldings‹ – a concept used across disciplines and genres (Tsing, 2015, Haraway, 2016, Haraway, 2013) that describes the generative process of speculating and weaving into being possible worlds through actively attending to the thick present of vitalist ethopolitics (Osborne and Rose, 2023, de La Bellacasa, 2017) by creating representations of alternative social relations including ways of knowing, designing and living together (Howell, 2023).

Disobedient data: artistic means for bewitched metrics – *Genital (*) Panic* by Mary Maggic

Genital (*) Panic by Mary Maggic

The work *Genital (*) Panic* is a hands-on public workshop and durational performance by artist Mary Maggic, found upon the systematic medical dismissal and removal of intersex sexualities at birth. It departs from the simultaneously ongoing hormonal disruptions caused by pollution, which lead to the steady decrease of the male distance between anus and genital (the AGD), a metric that indicates an infant's sex. The so-called »environmental queering agency« (Mary Maggic, 2023) of pollution, thus entails a continuous rise of physiological intersex features and reminds us of our constant becoming with the world.

Participants are invited to biometrically capture; model and 3D print their genitals and donate their scans to a crowdsourced database, »the archive of unruly bodies« (ibid.), a queer population study based on the participant's chosen gender identity instead of their assigned sex. Engaged for this »counter-hegemonic strategy that recognizes our bodies as unfixed and changeable«, biohacking becomes a medium and methodology for »collaborative queerings of the status quo« (ibid.).

Without targeting biometrics in particular, the workshop addresses and counter-performs the essential logics and properties of biometrics; the metrification of life though normative databases. By meshing, recombining and repurposing traces of the digital and the embodied self, biometrics are both mimicked and debunked for a process of queer subjectivation and embodiment.

BruiXes_Lab

BruiXes_Lab is a collective where biohacking and witchcraft rituals are performed to demystify and unite people around female intimate care and sexual pleasure (Fig.2). Public workshops combine tansfeminist DIY practices, such as the fermentation of bodily fluids, with microbiology and open-source biotechnology, to break taboos and »construct a do-it-yourself sensibility about being in symbiosis with the environment« (BruiXes_Lab, 2023). One outcome is norm-breaking designs of immersive and queer sexual prostheses (Fig.1, Fig.3.). An immaterial and speculative outcome is the re-enchantment of technology as an intermediary for new imaginaries and collectivities, based on care as a knowledge practice. Its variables are biometrics that forward another view of what counts as ›bio‹, by empowering othered data, like the microfauna in vaginal fluids.

Bruixes means ›witch‹ in Catalan, a token for patriarchal marginalization, sisterhood and disobedience, that the collective draws their identity and inspiration from:

»It's all about the methodology. Before, witches were magicians of the body, based on their awareness that everything is living and connected – a knowledge we forgot, because we invested in medicine and technology. We want to revive that knowledge and the process of symbiosis and biophilia, so while biohackers in the Silicon Valley program convenience, we practice a ritualistic form of biohacking« (BruiXes_Lab, 27.3.2023: Interview).

Biohacking becomes a care practice for the relational self, who's vulnerable becoming depends on response-able interactions with the world. At the intersection of witchcraft and biohacking BruiXes_Lab founds an ethico-onto-epistemology to twist data to cultivate biophilia, which means a ›love of life or living things‹. Following Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's localization of care as »an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation« (2011), the biohacks of BruiXes_Lab, »materialize something that was previously understood to be impossible«. This harmonizes with the definition of magic by researcher and scholar Teresa Tanenbaum (Tanenbaum, 27.4.2023: Interview).

Queering data: biohacking as feminist pedagogy

These worldings present biohacking as an existential media medium that engender co-existential knowledges and imaginaries. They are queering data so as to limit datafication as a »figuration of unboundedness« (Lagerkvist 2022: 23).

Genital (*) Panic performs a critique of metric knowledge by reappropriating the datafication and recombination of embodied existence for queer ends. Biometrics are twisted to problematize how dualist constructions of the body are interlinked with the objectivity claims of dataism as an ideology. By performing non-normative bodies as disobedient bodies that express our entanglements, the dataset itself is queered, through encoding experiences that have no common measure.

The biohacks of BruiXes_Lab queer data by positing relationality as a source of insight to respond to our surroundings carefully. From being a mirror of our normativity, technology transforms into an intermediary that reflects a co-existential picture back.

These queerings of data transcends data's claim to objectivity by »privileging anecdotes, situations, embodiment and multiplicity [– in short, sensuous knowledge –] as a way of knowing and feeling the world« (Larochelle, 2022).

Queer, in light of this trouble, can thus be understood as a subject position particularly exposed through the biased, binary configuration of digital existence, and an ethico-political and epistemic notion at the limit, an in-between which always already presupposes the existence of an other-wise. This entry proposes sensuous knowledge to be that limit of datafication as a knowledge regime. Through their care-ful interventions of sensuous knowledge, biohackers queer data as an analytic to intervene response-ably (Martin et al., 2015) seizing the digital limit situation by defending life's actuality (Fig. 4.). By reminding us that coexisting in our webs of care is political and requires our willingness to respond, biohacking becomes an existential practice of humane enhancement within a feminist ethic of respons(e)ability.

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