Michela De Carlo

SYNTHETIC BODIES AND FEELING GENERATORS

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to describe emerging forms of art and social practices that arise in the social media era, after the coming together of the self-awareness reflected in online environments and the conscious passivity of individuals to the algorithmic manipulation of desires. Accordingly, what follows is a brief introduction to these new forms of social structures and a description of the elements that shape the perfect projection of ourselves in our online experience, combined with samples of artworks investigating the forms and languages emerging in our social media life.

APRJA Volume 8, Issue 1, 2019
ISSN 2245-7755

Introduction

Digital media have changed the structure of our world, allowing us to live our existence across different stages and platforms. Yet, the physical borders of our computational experiences are still well defined: we don't surf the web through neural implants yet, and the main shift so far has been from pressing keys on a keyboard to touching a screen with our fingers. Except for the rare cases in which it occurs to be necessary for survival, we do not integrate technologies into our bodies, but we adapt our bodies to the way technologies work. Advances have been made in the medical field, such as the creation of artificial organs and use of robots in transplants. However, from this point of view, the implementation of technologies in daily life has followed paths which are far from those imagined by science fiction and the media theory of the twentieth century.

As a consequence, a question arises: If people can live with a 3D printed silicone heart, why can't they have feelings obtained through their virtual experience or social media life? They can, and they do. In some cases, social media try to reproduce these feelings, Facebook's 'reactions' being a common example: six emoticons that allow people to better express how they feel about specific content displayed on their wall — if compared to the emotional neutrality of the 'like' — and that allow the system to better profile us. It's a pretty basic approach, but it works.

Hyper-connectivity and new forms of communication influence our feelings, emotions, lifestyle and the way we perceive our bodies. Applications that improve or mask our appearance have been designed, as well as AI ChatBots that pretend to be the perfect boy/girlfriends and virtual environments in which we can reinvent ourselves and meet other people; but we can also think about sensory ASMR videos, or about those applications tracing our dream activity or helping people to fall asleep.

The awareness of a wired existence opens up the question of self-representation in the online environment. The perfect projection of ourselves becomes an important issue in our social media life, and exploring the way in which we design it is the main focus of this essay. But in order to get there, we first need to outline the social structure that technologies and social media have helped to shape, and the new model of individual on which this social structure is grounded, and to which this perfect projection belongs. In this effort, we will rely upon the work of Benjamin H. Bratton, Zygmunt Bauman, and Peter Sloterdijk.

The user and the bubble

Across the last decades, with the massive adoption of new technologies in the private sphere of individuals and the global connectivity bringing together every single thing we do, we find ourselves confronting a new social complexity, that has caused, as a consequence, a new, strong need to retrace, rephrase and rethink the borders of the social structure we are living in.

In his book *The Stack*, sociologist Benjamin H. Bratton considers the form of the stack to describe the changes induced by an ever more digitized society, but also to re-define a hypothetical geo-political map integrating these two aspects in a dichotomous way:

> *I propose The Stack as a way that we might map political geography, but also for how we understand the technologies that are making that geography.*

> *[…] this figure of The Stack both does and does not exist as such; it is both an idea and a thing; it is a machine that serves as a schema as much as it is a schema of machines. It lets us see that all of these different machines are parts of a greater machine, and perhaps the diagrammatic image of a totality that such a perspective provides would, as theories of totality have before, make the composition of alternatives — including new sovereignties and new forms of governance — both more legible and more effective. As the shape of political geography and the architecture of planetary-scale computation as a whole, The Stack is an accidental megastructure, one that we are building both deliberately and unwittingly and is in turn building us in its own image. (Bratton 4-5)*

Bratton idealizes a 'megastructure', exemplifying a hybrid social model — computational and non-computational — with a histogram composed by different levels co-dependent on each other, and arranged vertically one upon the other: Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface and User (Bratton 10-11). It's on the level of the User that I'm going to focus in the following. For Bratton, the User — a word borrowed from the field of design — is the human being as a subject that organizes the system they inhabit, shaping it in their own image. Their synthetic double is shaped by social factors such as micro-economies and psychology. In brief, for Bratton the User is not an individual or an un-individual, but rather a plurality of agents, a position within a system; and without this system, they wouldn't have a role, nor an essential identity.

In another passage, Bratton writes: "As we human users reflect on ourselves with images of quantified digital traces, the richly detailed portrait reflected back convinces us of our individual coherency and efficacy." (Bratton 260) If our synthetic representation is mediated by social filters along the process of transformation from human to User, the system in which we choose to insert our image — the Interface depending upon the Address, depending upon the City, depending upon the Cloud, depending upon the Earth — gives back to us, in turn, these social filters, providing a detailed, persuasive portrait of our coherence and individual effectiveness.

This loop between human, User, reflection, User and human can be described as a circle, a loop with a positive, self-feeding feedback. The modal value of this paradigm is the reflection. If we combine these thoughts with what philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman claims in *Liquid Life*, writing about the accelerated rhythms we are subject to, it's very likely that the reflection sent back by the system wouldn't match anymore with the idea of coherence and individual effectiveness to which we were referring when we generated our image as User.

This variance, although minimal, should be added to another circle/loop. If we keep the two poles (human and User) still, considering them as the two input and output poles and keeping the perfect shape of the circle, the sum of all the loops will develop by including the Z axis: the third dimension. The sum of all this constant and perpetual variance will produce a spherical shape, a globe.

The three-dimensional rendering of the close circuit described in figure 1 evokes the metaphor of the bubble, as it is used by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in *Spheres I - Bubbles*, as the intimate subjectivity of the individual: the unit of measurement made by the individual basket of experiences and interactions of the individual.

While Bratton calls this unit of measurement User, placing it at the top of his linear

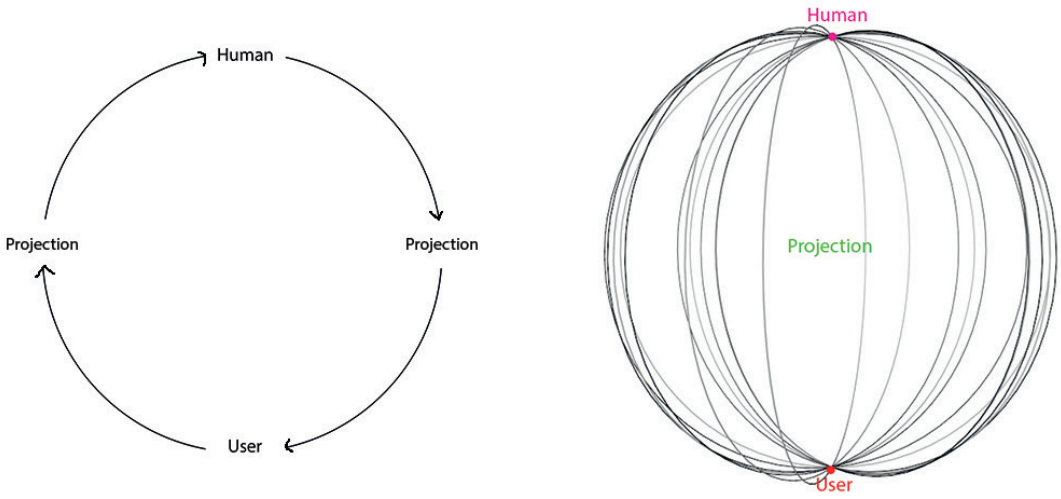

Figure 1: Human-User Perpetual Variance.

structure composed of overlapping platforms, Sloterdijk, on the other hand, uses the individual sphere as a basis for a model of social architecture that, in *Spheres III - Foams*, he coherently describes as a "foam architecture" (Sloterdijk 15): a plurality of spheres combined in a disorganized way — one upon the others, one next to the others. Back to *Spheres I - Bubbles*:

> *In the foam worlds, however, no bubble can be expanded into an absolutely centered, all-encompassing, amphiscopic orb; no central light penetrates the entire foam in its dynamic murkiness. Hence the ethics of the decentered, small and middle-sized bubbles in the world foam includes the effort to move about in an unprecedentedly spacious world with an unprecedentedly modest circumspection; in the foam, discrete and polyvalent games of reason must develop that learn to live with a shimmering diversity of perspectives, and dispense with the illusion of the one lordly point of view. (Sloterdijk 75)*

The cells of the foams lose the perfect shape of the sphere, and even if they are attached to one another, forming an ephemeral net, they are not truly connected.

The perfect projection of ourselves

Although very different from each other, the models of individual outlined by Bratton and Sloterdijk are very useful to describe the way we live our social media life, and we expand our identity online by designing the perfect projection of ourselves. Both Bratton's User and Sloterdijk bubble do not have a fixed identity and shape, but they are shaped and changed by the system they are part of (and thus change as they move from system to system, from platform to platform). And their consistency is not an original condition, but a final achievement — the result of the recollection of their "quantified traces" (Bratton 260).

This achievement is what I call the perfect projection of ourselves. This perfect projection isn't just the result of an effort in

Figure 2: Ryan Trecartin, I-BE AREA (2007). Video, 1 hour, 48 minutes.
© Ryan Trecartin, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Sprueth Magers.

self design — what I call in the following 'virtual representation'; but it also requires an ability to actively and passively employ the tools that the digital realm offers us to feel and express emotions — what I call 'feeling generators'; and a willingness to passively accept the algorithmic manipulation of our feelings and desires, and to actively engage with non-human personalities and artificial intelligences.

To introduce these three topics, let's briefly consider one of the first artworks ever to engage with the projection of ourselves in online environments: Ryan Trecartin's *I-BE AREA* (2007). The movie, shot as a linear narrative but also uploaded on YouTube in ten minute segments, famously portrays a group of young, over-active people with heavy make-up in a colorful, messy set designed by the artist himself and his collaborator Lizzie Fitch. Although each character is presented as an individual, the fact that they speak the same language and that they are often interpreted by the same actors (Trecartin and Fitch among them) enforces the feeling that they are different manifestations of the same identity: I-Be, the main character of the movie, of which the narrative outlines the "area", the cluster of his various realities and identities. At the beginning of the movie, I-Be, a self-proclaimed clone, "I exist because of Command V. Copy and paste some guy's DNA" (Trecartin 8) — has a conversation with his avatar. Here, I-Be explains his avatar — who wants to assign him a paper — that it can't assign anything to him, because "I created you". I-Be's avatar is his own online projection, the 'virtual representation' of himself;

but at the same time has evolved into an 'independent avatar' (IA), an autonomous intelligence who writes papers and has its own emotions. But I-Be refuses to recognize and accept his avatar's independence, so far to decide to delete it: "You can just go cowboy some abandoned files in my trash can. Swup drag to the trash, empty it, empty it, I emptied it. Empty." (Trecartin 10)

Virtual representation

By posting pictures, sharing articles and thoughts, or composing 3D avatars, we are always trying to create the ideal projection of ourselves in the virtual realm. Our identity expands beyond the body, and 'users' can become whatever they want, or just idealize themselves showing only their best traits — like a smooth 3D face with no imperfections.

Our virtual representation is usually fragmented into a number of 'quantified traces' — tweets, likes, comments, photos, videos, sounds; some of them are permanent, some others are ephemeral, but all of them contribute to shaping a portrait of ourselves. In her digital painting work, the young Chinese artist Ruby Gloom (1991) reflects on this by combining these traces into iconic, convincing portraits. In her series *Insta Client* (2017-ongoing), Gloom makes 3D portraits of people, drawing inspiration from a selfie that is sent her by the client. These portraits are made to be shared on social networks and be traced thanks to the use of hashtags; in many cases, they are used by the *Insta Clients* as profile pictures.

What's especially interesting about this project is the fact that most of the photos the artist receives — providing a model for her portraits — are not rough, plain photographs, but are themselves already manipulated using other applications, presenting for instance glittering effects, hearts all over the subject

Figure 3: Ruby Gloom, *Insta Clients* (2017), 3D renders. Courtesy of the Artist.

and other kinds of digital filters. In some cases the faces are masked by Augmented Reality filters. Gloom considers these 'client generated' additions made with other applications, as they were part of the face, and paints them in her portraits. Without distinguishing between reality and make-up, she takes the image that she gets, and as a machine she produces a new synthetic 3D version of that image and spreads the new 'selfie' she has created on social networks.

Thomas Macho's facial society, that "continually produces faces" (Belting 295) comes to mind together with the idea of the prominent face described by Macho and Hans Belting as a "blank facial formula" (Macho 121); but in this work, it evolves into a *filtered facial formula*. Here, the virtual representation doesn't take off from a point zero that we can consider the real or natural face (even if we can wonder if a simple photo can be considered a natural face), but already from a simulation. The result is a simulation of a simulation.

Another point that's important to highlight is that — by examining the representation of identity in the social media era — we don't talk anymore only about a specific shape, as it could be a human body or a human face, at least not in an absolute way. The focus is more on the manipulation or the masking of the traditional form, and in some cases on its absence. For this reason when we consider the virtual portrait, we don't speak about *the body*, rather we deal with *the self*. And this self is temporary, transient, unstable, ephemeral.

To explain this shift — from the body to the self — let's refer again to Bauman. In *Liquid Life*, he states that the acceleration of our contemporary life forces us into new beginnings and consequently new losses, repeatedly:

> *[…] in varying degrees they all master and practice the art of liquid life: acceptance to disorientation, immunity to vertigo and adaptation to a state of dizziness, tolerance for an absence of itinerary and direction and for an indefinite duration of travel. […] Looseness of attachment and revocability of engagement are the precepts guiding everything in which they engage and to which they are attached. (Bauman 4)*

In order to survive this lifestyle, you need to be able to let things go, to eliminate the past. Then, Bauman assumes that the same concept works with identities, which means that we have to be able to rebuild ourselves in an easy and fast way, without the fear to leave the past behind like — a *story* on Instagram, that only last 24 hours. A reference to Ryan Trecartin's *I-BE AREA* would fit well here. In the movie, I-Be deletes his Avatar IA by sending him to the trash, where he can join his other previous avatars. No regrets — it will be replaced soon.

In 2009, in his interview "Talking to myself about the politics of space", Sloterdijk played around this concept too, writing about multiple personality in relation to online activity:

> *From my point of view, the multiple personality is nothing other than the individual's answer to the disappearance of his real social surroundings, and is thus a plausible response to the chronic lack of social stimulation. The second possibility relates to the modern practice of networking. The horde returns in the guise of an iPhone address book. Close physical togetherness is no longer a necessary condition of sociality. (Sloterdijk)*

Figure 4: Kate Durbin, Hello Selfie Miami (2015), performance. Courtesy of the Artist.

A work dealing with the ephemerality, lightness and detachment of digital identities is Los Angeles-based artist Kate Durbin's performance *Hello Selfie Miami* (2015). In this work, Durbin transformed herself and her girl crew into a kind of 'kitty-mermaids' made-up and dressed with pastel colors. During Art Basel Miami, Durbin wore and put kawaii stickers on the body of half-naked woman performers. They also wore wigs with un-natural and bright colours. After this masking process, Durbin and the performers — voice-less as Andersen's Little Mermaid — started to take selfies, with their selfie sticks in their hands, among the artworks of the group show in which Durbin was invited to exhibit, without ever speaking to visitors. After the shooting session, the performers walked slowly and solemnly outside the gallery, still ignoring the audience while passing through it; and they walked to the sea, always with selfie sticks in their hands - a new extension of their bodies. There Kate and the other performers walked in the water leaving their smartphones on the seabed. Like the short human life of *The Little Mermaid*, the selfie's identity generated along the performance and archived in the mobile gallery metaphorically vanishes with the foam of the waves. The new temporary identity disappears, letting us imagine a new beginning.

Feeling generators

I call 'feeling generators' those tools — phone applications, online experiences, digital simulations — that provoke emotions which are close to the ones we feel in our physical world, but are born in a virtual context medi-ated by the use of devices, interfaces and hardwares; and those tools that allow us to share our feelings in the virtual sphere. The

online projection of emotions becomes in turn a generator of emotions for the feeling of empathy that it causes in other people. As a corollary to this definition, we can distinguish the feeling generators into two different groups: *the passive* and *the active*.

Passive feeling generators are characterized by the possibility they offer to feel emotions produced during and through our online experience without any active interaction on our side: we just have to open an application, press play, etc. Some examples are: the state of anxiety generated by the lack of response from a person who's visibly online when you write them; the desire to find out the content inside a box when watching an unboxing video; the combination of positive feelings and a distinct static-like tingling sensation on the skin while watching an ASMR video, etc.

Active feeling generators are those which allow us to externalize our feelings online: so, we can use default tools provided by social networks to communicate our emotions, or share statements upon specific issues on blogs, etc. Some common feeling generators are characterized by a co-existence of both aspects, active and passive. Just think about online sexual gaming, or applications that are based upon the structure of video games, in which active interaction by people with a generative feedback by the machine and vice-versa is at the base of the game simulation system.

Talking about passive feeling generators, let's briefly focus on the ASMR phenomenon by examining a recent work by the French artist Caroline Delieutraz. In her video *Unboxing + Tapping + Whispering with Rikita* (2017), she investigates the world of the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) by featuring Rikita, a well-known young French YouTuber making ASMR videos. Here, Rikita unboxes a package, describing in a whispering voice what she finds while unwrapping, one by one, the sculptures from the series *Embedded files* (2015-2017), by Delieutraz herself. The sculptural work is about the embodiment of our internet habits

Figure 5: Caroline Delieutraz, *Unboxing + Tapping + Whispering with Rikita* (2017). Video, 48 minutes, 56 seconds. Courtesy of the Artist.

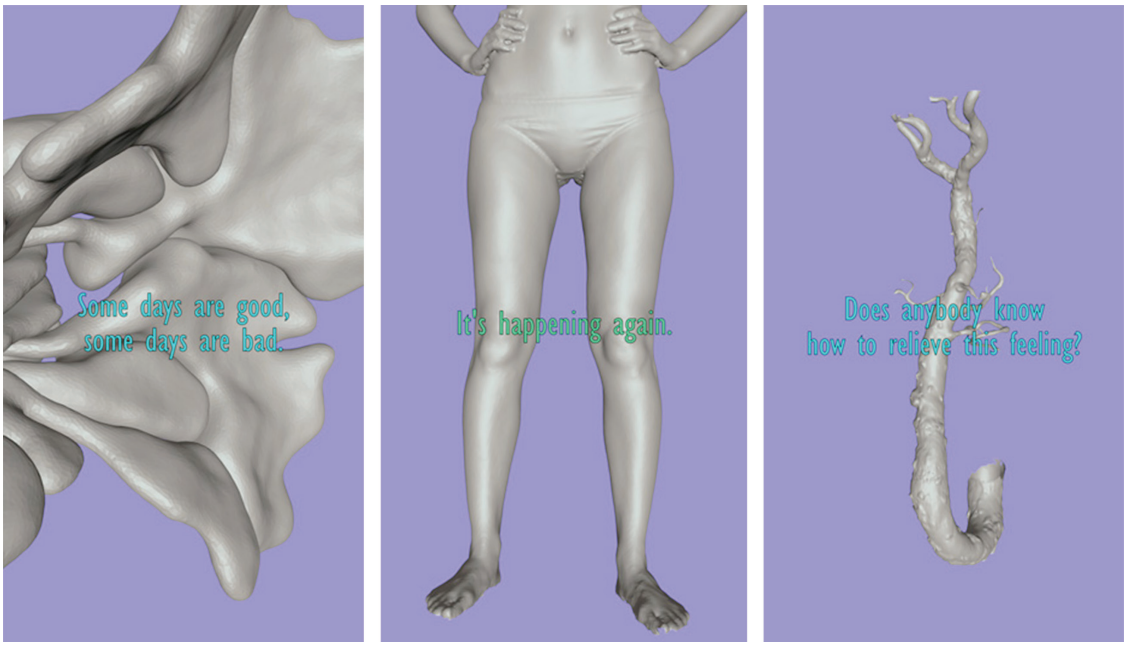

Figure 6: Juliette Goiffon and Charles Beauté, *Does Anybody Know?* (2015-2017). Video 18 minutes. Courtesy of the Artists.

and about future archaeology: in the series, Delieutraz collected images on the internet, printed them together with technologies of common use and trendy objects of that period, and enclosed them in paraffin blocks. The final result is something in between a time capsule and a future fossil.

In other words, if in 2015 — with *Embedded files* — Delieutraz translated our online experience into a physical reality, in the 2017 video she associated to this process a whispering soul, asking to Rikita to tap, unbox and describe the sculptures. In this new step, the previous process of embodiment loses its materiality and reverses back to an ephemeral state — an ASMR video on YouTube — while achieving a new sense of aura. The objects made by Delieutraz become new objects of desire thanks to the sensual voice of Rikita. They gain empathy. These sculptures are no longer the untouchable, precious objects on display in a white cube set-up. Even if we are not actually touching them, we can feel this sensation with our eyes and over all we can hear this touch and experience a tingling pleasure with it. In ASMR videos, objects become triggers able to generate relaxing or exciting sensations. As Delieutraz explained in an interview with Stephanie Vidal: "The object's value is determined by its potential as a trigger" (Vidal). So the objects become an input to be processed by the voice or the touch of the YouTuber, and the output is a video that people can easily find online.

In addition to the fact that these videos are recorded by people for generating effects on other people and then uploaded online on mainstream channels such as YouTube — which makes them easily accessible on a user-friendly interface — an important aspect of ASMRs is the intimacy in which the audience experience them. An ASMR video is selected out of the many available online, and experienced wearing headphones or, even better, earphones (that allow us to better enjoy the binaural recording). The feelings generated by these videos may vary from relax to ecstatic tingling, from skin pleasure to non-sexual orgasm. Although a purely virtual, mediated experience, filtered by our

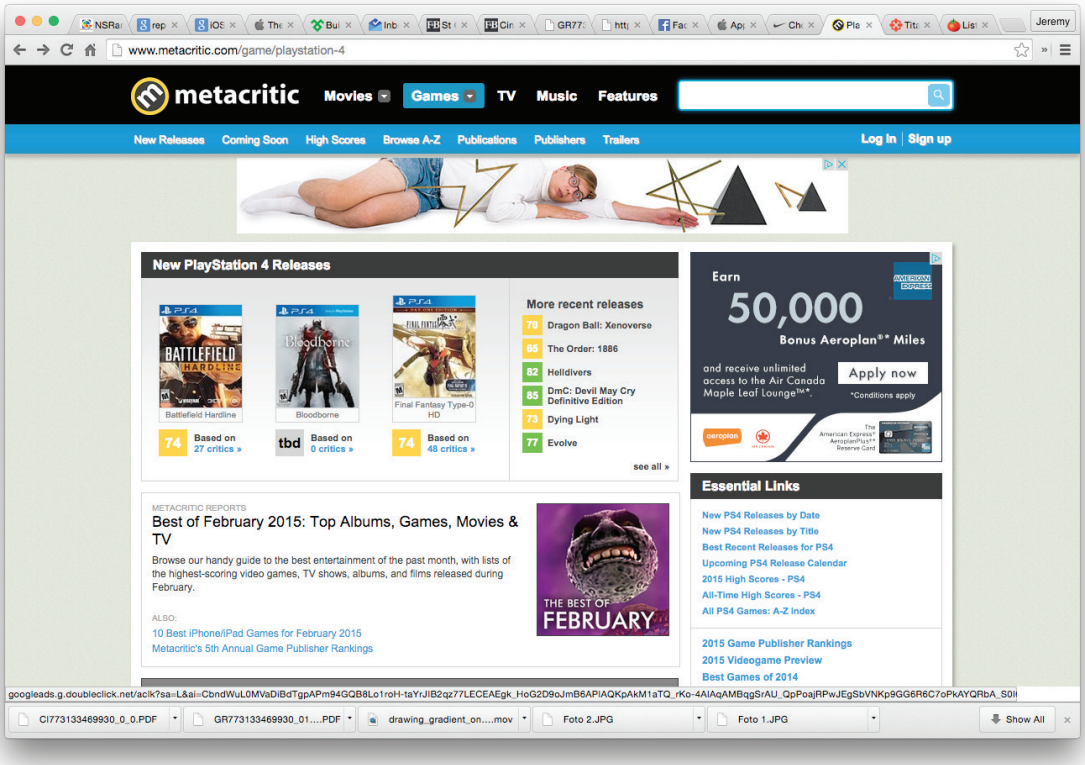

Figure 7: Jeremy Bailey, *The You Museum* (2015). Net-based project. Courtesy of the Artist.

eyes and ears, it's finally through its effects on our skin — its physical consequences — that we can measure the effectiveness of an ASMR video.

A work exploring the attitude to share emotions online through what I call the active feeling generators is the video *Does Anybody Know?* by the French artists Juliette Goiffon and Charles Beauté. After spending two years observing and studying the behaviours of people on medical blogs, they selected part of the conversations and statements they considered relevant for their research, and they edited them into a video together with a continuous flow of 3D scans of different parts of the body. Each body part is accompanied by a question, an expression of anguish, a fragment of testimonies stolen from the medical forums.

This hypnotic experience reveals the concerns of our society about medical issues and the need to share these worries over the internet. *Does Anybody Know?* also shows our paradoxical vision of medicine, of its highly technological universe which is at the same time intrinsically human. This succession of visual and textual points of view brings a double experience of indiscretion and projection on the side of the spectator, nourished at the same time by the observation of the body and the expression of the human thought.

Manipulation of data, machine learning and AI

> *"you mean machines are like humans?"*
> *I shook my head. "No, not like humans. With machines the feeling is, well,*

> *more finite. It doesn't go any further. With humans it's different. The feeling is always changing. Like if you love somebody, the love is always shifting or wavering. It's always questioning or inflating or disappearing or denying or hurting. And the thing is, you can't do anything about it, you can't control it." (Murakami 120)*

Finally, the projection of our self in our online experience is influenced by the conscious passivity of the individual to the algorithmic manipulation of personal contents and desires. The elaboration of our personal information allows machine to calculate our preferences during our online experience. In Bratton's words, what happens is "the capitalized translation of interactions into data and data into interactions" (Bratton 42). This mechanism is mainly used by companies to better profile our needs and focus our attention to the proper advertising. It's also used by social networks to highlight contents that may get our interest. As a consequence, the *interface* we live in becomes a container contaminated by our *preferences*, our personal sphere.

The Canadian artist Jeremy Bailey exploits this mechanism of data calculation and advertising banners in his net-based project *The You Museum* (2015 - ongoing). On a dedicated website, he created a form with a few personal and basic questions, that the visitors had to answer. Using the answers given, which were indicators of preferences, an algorithm programmed by the artist selected which of Bailey's artworks the visitor might like, in a kind of ad-hoc curatorial selection. Yet, these artworks were not shown to you at the end of the questionnaire. The experience on the site was over once you completed the form and sent your data to the elaboration system made by the artist. What happened next was that your favourite Jeremy Bailey artwork — as chosen for you by the algorithm — randomly appeared alongside your daily online browsing, on advertising banners placed in social networks, newspaper homepages, and wherever a commercial banner could be placed.

A further purpose of the artist was to highlight the positive artistic potential in using data and advertising tools, as he stated in a 2015 interview with Marc Garrett on *Furtherfield*:

> *Yes, I'd like art to reflect positive social change instead of reflecting negative market demands. Artists have this tremendous ability and power to communicate and many are wasting that talent pandering to the decorating desires of the rich and powerful. I understand that everyone needs to make a living, but we also have a responsibility as artists to help make the world a better place. I also don't see why these two things need to be in conflict.*

Sloterdijk's and Macho's notion of 'nobject' might be useful here. Consolidating Macho's argument, in *Spheres I – Bubbles*, Sloterdijk describes nobjects as identifying a system of co-realities which, in a manner that does not include a comparison, are literally floating as creatures of proximity in front of an inner Self, who is not facing them, because it is itself in a fetal pre-subject state (Sloterdijk 200). A nobject is a being who lives in a parallel reality close to ours but who has not yet achieved the status of subject. This nobject condition described by Sloterdijk and Macho is very close to our current perception of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The idea that one day machines will come to think and learn like human beings dates back to the 1950s; today, also given to the continuous progress in research, we all expect that — sooner or later — AI will reach this goal:

the *Subject*. We are still waiting. Differently from the Independent Avatar conceived by Trecartin in *I-BE AREA* — who became a self-sufficient being with his own intelligence and emotions — by now, machine learning systems and AI are using 'big data' in order to make predictions of our future behaviour. They learn from us, and reflect us in a more polite and non-empathic way.

Works cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Life*. Polity Press, 2005.

Belting, Hans. *Face and the Mask: A Double History*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

Bratton, Benjamin H. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. MIT Press 2016.

Garrett, Marc. "Choose Your Muse Interview: Jeremy Bailey." *Furtherfield*, June 26, 2015, https://www.furtherfield.org/choose-your-muse-interview-jeremy-bailey/.

Macho, Thomas. "Zeichen aus der Dunkelheit. Notizien zu einer Theorie der Psychose." *Wahnwelten in Zusamennstoss. Die Psychose als Spiegel der Zeit,* edited by Heinz, Rudolf, Dietmar Kamper and Ulrich Sonnemann. Akademie, 1993.

Macho, Thomas. "Das Prominente Gesicht. Vom face-to-face zum interface." *Alle möglichen Welten. Virtuelle Realität, Wahrnehmung, Ethik der Kommunikationen,* edited by Fassleer, Manfred. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1999.

Murakami, Haruki. *Dance, Dance, Dance.* Vintage Books, 2003 [1988].

Reuell, Peter. "For Teens Who Feel It All, A Research-Backed Explanation." *The Harvard Gazette*, September 21, 2018, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/09/harvard-researchers-examine-evolution-of-emotion-differentiation/.

Sloterdijk, Peter. "Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space." *Harvard Design Magazine*, No 30 - (Sustainability) + Pleasure, Vol. I: Culture and Architecture, Spring - Summer 2009, www.harvard-designmagazine.org/issues/30/talking-to-myself-about-the-poetics-of-space.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Bubbles - Spheres vol I: Microspherology*. MIT Press, 2011.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Globes - Spheres vol II: Macrospherology*. MIT Press, 2014.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Foams - Spheres vol III: Plural spherology*. MIT Press, 2016.

Trecartin, Ryan. "*I-BE AREA* Transcript." *Electronic Arts Intermix*, https://www.eai.org/titles/i-be-area/supportdocs/35.

Vidal, Stephanie. "Interview with Caroline Delieutraz." *Making Contact*, online exhibition, 2017.