

Embodied Optimization - Traces of the Altered Self

Wider arts-based research context / theoretical framework

What happens when we alter and optimize our bodies? We all know the results from the images we see on a daily basis: Bodies become stronger and slimmer, minds become more organized and smarter, faces become softer and younger. But what we don't know: What is left behind? What is unseen? What happened before and - most importantly - why? Do we want to play God? Showing an optimized version of oneself - an Ideal Self (İsmael and Tekke 2015) - has long been a longing of human nature and in today's digital sphere, the visual expression of an optimized body has become a "conversational practice that draws images and their referents into the immediate moment of discursive interaction" (Frosh 2016, 254). Bodies are becoming a carefully cultivated and consummated image and bodily optimization has become a new battleground for humankind: Who gets to be optimized and who doesn't? With the means of artistic research, the PhD project is set out to look at the back room of embodied optimization. With a focus on altered bodies, the project ourselves and looks at the interplay of imagery, biopolitics, technology and the perception of ourselves.

The topic of body politics has become ever-present and "we are literally drifting through many different specular performances of the body. [...] We no longer inhabit a body in any meaningful sense of the term but rather occupy a multiplicity of bodies—imaginary, sexualized, disciplined, gendered, laboring, technologically augmented bodies" (Kroker 2012, 2). These multiplicity of body images is not always consciously perceived, but it "mediates further the way in which individuals perceive and understand the world, and how they feel about it" (Aydin 2017, 68), which often leads to a demand for change - for manifold reasons.

Hypotheses / research questions / objectives

By focusing on what remains and what is out of the picture when bodies are getting optimized - for personal, social, political or other reasons - I am able to shine a light on stories hidden behind the optimization and answer the research question: What are the motifs of bodily optimization and what is left behind in the process? I will pose those questions with the means of visual representations of things unseen, left out of the mainstream picture and left behind when altering human bodies - both contemporary and historical. The outcome is set to challenge the current visual landscape surrounding bodily optimizations - from prosthetics to transhumanists, from medical need to questions of gender and belonging - and by exposing the stories behind the changes create a public dialogue that seeks to answer the "Why?" rather than the "What's Next?".

Approach / methods

As the observation object - the body - becomes a facade projected with ideals, I seek to look at the fringes to get to the core and will expand on the research question by creating and collecting an archive of photographs and other visual materials showing traces of body optimization. This can be as direct as showing scars or materials used for different transformations. But I will also include more subtle traces like pressure marks of tools, found footage of bodies left behind, empty capsules or conversations leading towards a bodily change, among others. With the means of artistic research the PhD project is able to analyze and communicate the ever-present field of bodily optimization now being at a tipping point in history. By shifting the main focus away from the already known visuals of bodily transformations and looking at the “noise” surrounding human optimization, the project is able to circumvent known aesthetics and get directly at the core of why people are intrigued by longevity, youthful looks, implants or other changes of the body. It will deliver something that other approaches have difficulties to grasp: the story of the “Why?”.

Preliminary Findings and Future Plans

With the means of documentary, staged and still life photography I have been able to collect a set of images of optimized bodies and the tools/technology around body optimization, which I am planning to continue this year. By comparing and juxtaposing those images with other visual material like the ones shown in the video and other archival images of bodily enhancements, I want to look for the effects on our relation with our physical bodies and raise questions about body ideals, who defines them and how machines and software are trying to enhance and imitate them. Knowledge will be generated through creation, comparison and collection of visual material surrounding embodied optimization by looking at the fringes and the otherwise unseen within visual material within the topic. I want to then use the findings to pose relevant questions and raise awareness about social developments happening right now like artistic work currently developed by Shu Lea Cheang (Simpson 2019) in the field of the history of incarceration of sex offenders, or Georg Tremmel’s work looking at current developments of CRISPR tools (Tremmel 2018).

References

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