

KEEP IT SIMPLE, MAKE IT FAST!

**an
APP—
ROACH
to UNDER
GROUND
MUSIC—
SCENES**

VOL. 6

Paula Guerra & Ana Oliveira

Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An Approach to Underground Music Scenes

Volume 6

Paula Guerra & Ana Oliveira (eds.)

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3.3. **PLASTIC BARBIES AND BODIES MADE OF PLASTIC**

Federica Manfredi⁵⁵



× **Abstract**

Plastic is a controversial material, often connected with thoughts concerning the climate emergency. However, plastic doesn't only concern the planet: it is also involved in many cosmetic practices, from injective technologies to facial rollers or other rejuvenating tools. Plastic bodies are not only those with silicone prothesis: the plasticity of humans is linked to the potentiality of transformation, but that can also involve polymeric materials. This paper is going to consider the role of plastic in body projects and their plasticity, understood as ability of self-modification in pursuit of social goals of empowerment. The reflection is based on results of the project Excel – The Pursuit of Excellence, comparing data collected during the workshop series The Hacked Barbie about the pressure to actively produce “perfect” bodies, and biohacking practices explored in the doctoral project Learning to Fly.

Keywords: plastic, body modification, Barbie, practice-based methodology, excellence.

1. **Introducing plastic and bodies**

Plastic is a controversial material featuring the contemporary reflection about how humanity is irremediably shaping a new geological phase of the planet: the Anthropocene debate is raising acknowledgement on the role of plastic polymers and climate changes in connection with the industrialization process (Zalasiewicz et al., 2010; Bougleux, 2017; Dall'O, 2019), coining the expression *plastic age* (Couzens & Yarsley, 1956). Scientific evidence about the toxic permanence of the synthetic material on the Earth are raising concerns that are not limited to the environment; rather they concern human life, highlighting the long term consequences for human being survival in a polluted ecosystem: “Yet the plastic that insinuates itself pervasively into all of our surroundings will never disappear: it will be all that will remain in a future fossil layer” (Longobardi, 2014: 186).

Plastic is not only embedded in the planet or a protagonist of the industrial production of the last decades. The material has been progressively inserted in biotechnologies and embodied by human beings: plastic is involved in the medical industry to fix bodies perceived as defective (Jarrin & Pussetti, 2021), as well as in many cosmetic practices, such as rejuvenating tools and injectable technologies. These examples of body modification have been analyzed in the project *Excel – The Pursuit of Excellence*, developed at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon, with Chiara Pussetti as Principal Investigator and founded by the *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia*.

Presenting the workshop series “The Hacked Barbie”, that constituted one of the investigative methods developed in Excel, this paper is going to present data related to pressure of excellence in Europe, mainly referring to data collected in Portugal and Italy between 2021 and 2022. The workshop invited over 70

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participants to manipulate a doll for creative projects aiming to facilitate a reflective process about the use of body practices in the everyday life of attendees. The plastic flesh of anthropomorphic toys supported this experimental method of practice-based ethnography, confirming that contemporary bodies are continuously under construction.

Human bodies are plastic devices because they can adapt, be modified, and transformed to follow personal projects that (re)produce hegemonic models of beauty, but not exclusively: after a more in-depth presentation about the project *Excel*, the initial part of the paper will examine data of biohacking practices, collected during my doctoral project *Learning to Fly. A trans-spatial ethnography on body suspensions in Europe* (Manfredi, 2022b). Biohacking interventions challenge the understanding of hegemonic models of perfect bodies, highlighting the research of originality and uniqueness along with beautification goals. Some of these body modifications involve silicone implants, while others use temporary hooks inserted in the skin or a scalpel to bifurcate tongues.

The aesthetic is only one of the components of the *perfection*: body interventions indicate the expectation of positive recognition as well as uniqueness. This is a cultural labor of equilibrium in between the respect of shared models of perfection and the pursuit of customized versions of excellence, and the result can be controversial, as some conclusive examples of The Hacked Barbie workshop will show.

2. The Excel project and painful processes to be excellent

The project *Excel - The Pursuit of Excellence* was born in 2017 at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon and it concluded in late 2022 with the artistic exhibition *Be F**king Perfect – The Pursuit of Excellence*, curated by Chiara Pussetti and supported by the engagement of Terra Esplendida and the artistic assistance of Antonio Faria. The exposition was hosted at the Óriq Gallery in the district of Campo de Ourique in Lisbon, from 15 September to 16 October 2022, and it constituted the final dissemination activity of the project *Excel*.

In an entrepreneurial approach of the self (Foucault, 2005), the project analyzed contemporary and non-therapeutic body modifications as biotechnologies, understood as body interventions aiming to enhance the social performance of individuals. The research team, that I had the pleasure to join as a member, explored bio-investments addressed to body shapes, wrinkles, skin colors and cognitive abilities, that are modified through plastic surgery, anti-aging techniques, skin bleaching practices, and cognitive enhancements (Pussetti & Pires, 2020; Pussetti, 2021a; Pussetti 2021b; Barbosa, 2021), among others⁵⁶.

Body interventions require considerable amount of energy, pain exposure and economic resources, and they are perceived as the pursuit of personal desires and ambitions because we internalize the social value of being excellent. Interviewees reported the life-long need to always be the best version of themselves, as confirmed by many slogans and commercials of the Western societies that (re)produce the ambition of being “with no limits”, “anything you want”, because “you’re worth it”. I argue that the excellence is a social construction multiply composed: the ethnographical data collected during *Excel* showed that the excellence can take the form of a body that is young, fit, tall and thin, with spotless and bright skin, long and straight hair, where disability, aging signs, or a non-white skin do not match with the hegemonic and heteronormative models of reference. The actions on the body enhance the social capital, for instance, improving the possibility of success in a job interview, in the search for a love-partner, or a flat to rent in a neighborhood with low crime rates. Beauty opens doors and facilitates connections in multiple life domains, and people are aware that investments in the body correspond to the empowerment of their social capital.

According to the post-modern perspective, individuals are responsible for their bodies (Giddens, 1991) and the body is the mirror of the self (Shilling, 1993), meaning that the appearance of the skin, hairs, nails, abdomen, or any other body’s part is perceived as revealing the commitment of the individuals to themselves. A not-perfect body is evidence of negligence, or a lack in the moral conduct of the person; and people – especially women – are disposed to undergo through elaborate, expensive, and painful processes to avoid the guiltiness of a lazy or lousy body performance. These considerations powerfully

56 More details on the project *Excel-The Pursuit of Excellence* are [available at project.eu](http://availableatproject.eu) (consulted 21.12.2022).

emerge in the graphic works of two artists who cooperated with the Excel team and who exposed a collection of their works on the occasion of the artistic exhibition *Be Fu**king Perfect-The Pursuit of Excellence*: Evija Laivinia, from Latvia, authorized a reproduction of her *Beauty Warriors* series (also presented in Pussetti et al. 2022), *Everything is Going to Be Awesome*, and *Fat Series*, while Jessica Ledwich, from Australia, shared a selection of her photographic work *Monstrous Feminine*. Their visual works ironically unfold the social pressures experienced by contemporary women to be always perfect, denouncing the physical pain and the emotional suffering required by the life-long process of self-engagement through the body. Evija Laivinia and Jessica Ledwich supported the translation of scientific results in an accessible visual language, and a picture of each series was selected for the two playbills of the exhibition (Figure 3.3.1, Figure 3.3.2).



► **Figure 3.3.1.** Playbill of the exhibition base on the graphic work of Jessica Ledwich
 ► **Source:** Excel-The Pursuit of Excellence



► **Figure 3.3.2.** Playbill of the exhibition based on the graphic work of Evija Laivinia
 ► **Source:** Excel-The Pursuit of Excellence

Jessica Ledwich's work uses blades, blood and morbid combinations to communicate the aggressivity of cosmetic practices and the resistance of people in front of physical sacrifices to achieve a wished body shape. On the other hand, to produce the series *Beauty Warriors*, Evija Laivinia decided to invite friends and family members to wear a collection of plastic objects she bought on a well-known e-commerce platform, promoting them as quick and simple solutions to acquire beautiful necks and forefront, such as the cheek slimmer or the nose massage, or to contrast age deterioration. Beauty nowadays is on sale and such tools remind us that all pockets can contribute to the achievement of a forever young body. There is a wide range of prices and cosmetic products promising skin whitening effects, from hundreds of euros in perfumeries of the Lisbon city centers to a 5-10€ as medium price for those sold in "ethnic shops", without a translated list of ingredients or the label of the European Community authorizing legal commerce (Pussetti & Pires, 2021). The beauty industry takes advantage of the cultural pressure to be perfect and people are exposed to the need for achieving excellent bodies, reproducing inequalities connected to economic power, social class, skin colour, age, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Simone de Beauvoir (1970) and Susan Sontag (1972) denounced in the 1970s the social invisibility of women not matching beauty standards, and Excel's data indicate that a body that ages 'badly' is perceived as demonstrating a lack of ability and commitment to the self and to appropriate standards of body performance. Rather than being invisible, wrinkles and flaccid flesh have a negative visibility, connected to moral disapproval. In other words, ugly people are not only un-matching beauty standards; rather, they are guilty of the lack of body domination and self-control. Plastic is not only present in the cosmetic devices for the low-income segment of costumers, such as the tools used by Evija Laivinia.

Plastic surgery involves the social meaning of a legitimate use of the polymer under the skin to shape breast, abdominals, noses and lips, as the ethnographical work of Meredith Jones illustrates when exploring narratives of patients who experienced plastic surgeries (Jones, 2008). If in the 1990s the pain was almost made invisible, focusing especially on surgery's results, today the recovery process has gained importance: the pain has become a proof of commitment. The acceptance of pain during a surgery is seen as evidence of morality to deconstruct claims of superficiality usually associated with cosmetic invasive procedures. Pain dignifies and "it becomes an act of courage, bravery and self-determination" (Jones, 2008: 53-54), an index of the engagement and responsibility in the self-making life-long project of construction.

3. Biohacking and the understanding of perfection as uniqueness

The project Excel showed that beauty is much more than aesthetic, and it relates to moral values and desires to be accepted, respected, and valued by our peers. Additionally, a perfect body is not only beautiful or spotless; rather, it needs to interpret the "perfection" in a unique and personal declination, as reminded by Antony Giddens in the construction of individuality as self-responsibility (Giddens, 1991).

During the doctoral project *Learning to Fly. A trans-spatial ethnography on body suspensions in Europe* (Manfredi, 2022b), developed from 2016 to 2022 at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon, I explored meanings associated with body suspension in a multi-sited perspective in Norway, Portugal, Italy, and on selected Facebook groups. A body suspension is a practice consisting in the elevation of a protagonist through metal hooks temporarily inserted in the skin; hooks are linked to ropes and to an above scaffolding called *rig* and, pulling the main rope, the protagonist is elevated from the floor as long as she/he desires. They are practiced during dedicated festivals and private events, where elected social figures facilitate the hook insertion, the rig connection and the after care. The surrounding community provides an emotional assistance that cooperates in the significance of the suspension as cultural labour, enhancing social ties and providing individual empowerment.

The research analysed body suspensions in conjunction with other body modification, such as tattoos, piercing, scarification, split tongue, and insertion of silicone implants, showing the connection of the hook-practice with a net of acts of care dedicated to the body, such as diet regimes, meditative and yoga routines, or abstinence from alcohol. In a phenomenological perspective, the ethnography indicated that suspensions' goal is the regeneration of the individual, a deep moral and physical empowerment pursuit thanks to the alteration of the perceptive abilities during the fly: the exposure to the pain provokes a so-called "hormonal kick" of adrenaline and endorphins that are interpreted as responsible for the activation of an altered state of consciousness.

The doctoral research showed that there is a rising interest in avant-garde operations with un-mainstream styles of body manipulation, also known as biohacking practices. If body modification is a general term referring to any intervention concerning flesh and skin, a biohacking operation is the act of altering the processes of one's body in an attempt to improve what is perceived as constituting the humanity. Some bio-hackers identify in the social movement "Do-it-yourself biology", aiming for the self-enhancement beyond human abilities: they embody technologies to empower senses and the body functionality, often inspired by animal skills, such as the cat's view in the darkness, or by interactions with machines in post-human horizons (Luceford, 2012). Similarly, the split-tongue inspired by reptiles is a practice enhancing the perception of tastes and the uses of the tongue muscle. It requires a dedicated period of recovery and of re-education of the tongue after the cutting.

Understanding biohacking as the self-design of bodies to achieve an enhanced version of the person, ethnographical data confirm the contemporary need for original and unique combinations of physical appearances alongside with an authentic and fulfilled sense of the self. As stated by Carolina "My bmods [body modifications] tell the story who I am, they are me and I am made by them" (Fieldnotes, December 2019).

The skin and the body materialize our relationship with others (Trosman, 2013) and how the navigation

in and through the world has shaped us as a unique combination of experiences, relationships and progressive knowledge acquisition. Body modifications are visual narratives and the site of discourses that systematically shape the objects narrated (Foucault, 1985), producers of the experience, and constructors of reality. In this sense, biohacking practices work to construct a unique identity acting on and with the body, attributing value and meaning to specific episodes or people instead of others, perceived by the protagonists as pillars of the self (Manfredi, 2022a). Body interventions correspond to the need and desire of self-design, electing those events of the past that the protagonist wishes to embody and to be defined by. Hacking the biology, the individual shapes and empowers their self-perception: the person actively engages in the planification of what is understood as a body that corresponds to an ideal sense of beauty, realized in a unique combination of body signs and key aspects of life that promote the full person in an original artisanal outcome. In this sense, the body reveals all its plasticity, making available an almost unlimited possibility of hacking and empowerment in a life-long perspective.

Biohacking procedures, especially those less conventional, such as the split-tongue or the incision of design on the skin through scalpels (Manfredi, in press), provoke ambivalent reactions, often seen as disobedient for the refusal of shared conventional rules concerning what a beautiful body should be, or what individuals are free to do with their body. Sometimes the explorative and avant-gardists tone is misinterpreted as evidence of deviancy, biologically or socially based, arousing suspicious of misconduct for the noncompliance (or rejection) of mainstream beauty standards. In reaction, biohackers often renounce the opportunity to explain their vision of the body and of the personality, adopting the strategy of invisibility online, during family meetings or in the workplace. In these cases, the authenticity of the self, pursuit through body intervention, is in antithesis with social inclusion and with the positive recognition of the efforts faced by the protagonist.

Despite superficial perception of biohacking practices, their meanings reveal the praise of perfection, the desire to be every day a better version of themselves, working to create more and more correspondence between the self and body; and no matter what it costs, even if the recognition of the process can be misunderstood.

4. A reflexive exercise through a metaphorical plastic flesh: the Hacked Barbie workshop

The plasticity of human bodies, meaning the ability to modify and to adapt our flesh and skin according to goals, wishes, and ambitions, has been investigated and discussed with a sample of 70 attendees in the workshop series *The Hacked Barbie*, an outreach and research activity of the Excel project developed by Chiara Pussetti and the present author. With a participative approach, participants aged between nineteen and seventy-one years old from Brazil, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Denmark, and England, have been invited to re-create their bodies on the metaphorical plastic flesh of a doll. They attended online and in-person workshops, organized in nine editions between February 2021 and March 2022.

The Barbie is the symbol of an idealistic perfect body (Ringrose & Coffey, 2016; Fusaschi, 2013), promoting Euro-American standards because the doll is white, blond, slim and tall. Additionally, she is eternally young and without a menstrual cycle: she is anatomically incomplete, by the absence of genitals. (Pussetti, 2021a: 12). Generations of children have been raised looking at the Barbie not only as a toy to play with, but also as a model of being to strive for, corresponding to the beauty standards also displayed on cat walks, in TV, and in the cinematographic industry.

The workshop's goal was to stimulate a different gaze on the body, disclosing everyday and exceptional practices participants direct to themselves to fit with society's beauty standards. With the objective to stimulate self-awareness and to deconstruct embodied models of excellence, we invited participants to reproduce their bodies by hacking a doll of their choice. Even the selection of the toy stimulated reflections concerning the limited options of bodies available on the market. In the workshop, obtaining a nice result was not the purpose; rather, the experience aimed to formulate new questions enjoying the hacking process and discovering new meanings and feelings. Pictures and notes of the hacking steps were collected and then displayed by each participant during the meeting, online or in person, followed by a common discussion led by the organizers.

The workshop made visible how participants construct themselves, acting on their body hair, breasts, nails or dressing styles. Some body parts were signified as more crucial than others: the group work around handcrafts during the final roundtable of each session showed how vulnerabilities and insecurities are connected to textures, colours, presence or absence of fat, wrinkles, hair, and other elements perceived in connection with age, gender and social respectability.

Laura, a university girl affected by the polycystic ovary syndrome, recreated a body-hair on the neck of the doll (Figure 3.3.3a) to represent her hormonal disfunction that provokes an excessive growth of body hair in the body's parts “where girls are not supposed to have hairs”, in her words.



- **Figure 3.3.3a.** Laura's creative project during the Hacked Barbie workshop
- **Figure 3.3.3b.** The load of the hormonal treatment
- **Source:** Pictures provided by the participant during the workshop.

The undesired presence of body hair was elaborated during the workshop as a self-esteem trouble that affected Laura for years, undermining her ability to relate with other people and to experience love relationships. The perceived incapacity to appropriately perform a feminine gender identity was a factor generating discomfort and sense of inadequacy for social performance through the body. In the creative handcraft, dark eye bags represent the insomnia and general fatigue related to the syndrome, along with acne scars on the Barbie's cheeks: all these elements contribute to creating a body that has less attractiveness compared to the doll's ones before the hacking process. The doll is naked to symbolise a health condition that is impossible to hide, according to Laura, and whose body is almost squashed under the load of the pills that aim to regulate her hormonal production (Figure 3.3.3b): “I can't forget to take my pills, they are my mask because they don't cure or solve the syndrome, rather they hide it” (fieldwork notes, April 2021). Perceived not even as a solid solution or positive health device, the therapy calls into question the sense of authenticity.

Manipulating the plastic flesh of the dolls, participants developed reflections about social pressures, expectations, but also fragilities and strengths often silenced or hidden in the lifelong commitment to produce the self through the body. The hacked Barbies reveal the disparities, the stress, and the negotiations that such bodies, and their subjects, have to deal with.



Another workshop participant used the occasion to reflect about the refusal of beauty models and the emotional consequences connected with un-mainstream choices: Lidia, in her twenties, presents a doll where body hairs have been designed with a black felt-tip pen on legs, groin, and underarms (Figure 3.3.4).



► **Figure 3.3.4.** Lidia's creative project during the Hacked Barbie workshop
► **Source:** Picture provided by the participant.

The hacking process on the doll represents the refusal of the participant to use depilation: "I would not say that letting my body hair remain on my body is a real modification. On the contrary, I do not intervene on them, and I am more natural than people who are used to waxing or shaving their body" (Fieldwork notes, April 2021). A *natural body* is interpreted as more authentic, closer to an ideal of coincidence with the Nature, or connected to a positive value that is held by a person uncorrupted. Corrupting factors are indicated as the concerns of looking appropriate, and being appreciated by peers, but moralized as superficial because not in line with a *naturality* that should instead inspire the actions on the body and the efforts of individuals.

Lidia presents her body hair as result of a personal labor, a reappropriation of her body and femininity. Despite that, she has to constantly face the negative judgments for her rebellion against a beauty standard that imposes her to be hairless. The others challenge her political positioning against a mainstream idea of feminine beauty especially during the summertime, but also in the privacy of her room, Lidia suffers the emotional consequences of being too distant from the mainstream model. In Figure 3.3.5 she represented her doll in front of a mirror, but the Barbie can't look at herself: body hair produces a body result that is not "good to be looked at", creating suffering for the social stigmatization.



Ma come posso guardarmi?

- **Figure 3.3.5.** Lidia's doll in front of a mirror and wondering "How can I look at myself?"
- **Source:** Picture provided by the participant.

The Hacked Barbie series, as a practice-based method of investigation (Brown, 2019), expanded the sensorial engaging and the communicative possibilities between participants and ethnographers: the manipulation of materials supported a communication and a mutual understanding beyond logo-centric logics (Eco, 1975). The creative work stimulated symbolic and multi-sensory channels of expression, in co-participative processes of meanings creation that redistributed the ethnographical power and empowered the reflexivity, as also evidenced in other art-based research (Foster, 1995; Schneider, 2008; Pussetti, 2018; Noronha, 2019; Manfredi, 2019).

5. Conclusions

Attractive bodies are produced and disciplined on the basis of models influenced by the Eurocentric and post-colonial culture of Western societies. We are condemned to always confront these models, even when we decide to subvert them by being rebellious: as Lidia's choice shows, the refusal of beauty standards end up emphasizing the "right way to behave", rather than a new possibility of being. The lack of opportune body performances, even if it's the result of an active or political positioning, forces us to dialogue and negotiate with mainstream models of perfection, in a life-long emotional and physical work. And if being original is a mandatory aspect of excellence, this value needs to be "properly" interpreted; otherwise the outcome will negatively shape the body performance. Some declinations of perfection are appropriated, while others push too far the interpretation of originality: there is a balance to achieve and it isn't made of unlimited possibilities.

The work of identity through the Barbie shows that people are not only subjects under the influence of models of beauty, or excellence. We are also able to react, negotiate and reproduce such values. We

are involved in constant processes of construction of our corporeality, dealing with hegemonic patterns that create hierarchies of bodies more or less adequate. We are the first judges of our efforts, the first (re) producers of pressures of excellence.

The plastic flesh of the dolls during the workshop facilitated reflective experiences about projects of self-design and the feelings associated with them, confirming the plasticity of participants' bodies: they are able to transform and adapt according to individual perspectives and plans regarding how perfection should be interpreted.

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