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.CONTENTS

.04

INTRODUCTION

.11

**ART ARCHAEO-
LOGICAL
INTERACTIONS**

Doug Bailey

.26

**MONSTERS AND
MEASURES:**

Two Approaches
to the Film Essay

Sasha Litvintseva
& Beny Wagner

.44

ART IN MOTION

Aesthetic Experiences
in the Context of the
New Digital Media

Constança Babo

.62

**TIME, SOUND,
AND OBJECT**

As Catalysts for
Thought, Emotion,
and Movement in
Artistic Creation

Rosinda Casais
& Filipa Cruz

.71

**MEDIATISED MOVE-
MENTS BETWEEN
FIELDWORK AND
LIFE**

Milan Kroulík

.79

**THE HACKED
BARBIE**

A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

Federica Manfredi
& Chiara Pussetti

.86

TRANSITIONS

Ana Barroso

.94

**VIRTUAL RECONS-
TRUCTIONS**

Of the Iconic Crystal
Palace Building and
the Industrial and
Commercial Museum
of Porto (Portugal)

Frederico Henriques
& Mário Bruno Pastor

.118

**REVOLUTION: AN
AUDIO-VISUAL
ESSAY**

Beatriz Albuquerque

.127

**E-MOTION: READ-
INGS OF PORTRAIT
AND FUGUE**

Daniel Tavares

.137

**ALIMENTARY NON-
INSCRIPTION:**

Desire and Eating
Disorders Through
Culture

Carolina Ferreira Baptista

.157

**BODILY PERFOR-
MATIVITY AND THE
SCORE-AS-TEXT:**

Understanding
Musical Improvisation
as a Politically
Subversive Force

Filippo Deorsola

.169

**LIQUEFAÇÃO
/LIQUEFACTION
VERSUS
ENDURECIMENTO
/RIGIDIFICATION**

AR Installation

Anna Rebecca
Unterholzner

THE HACKED BARBIE

A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

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THE HACKED BARBIE.

A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

Everybody knows that we need to take care of ourselves and our bodies. But what does that mean exactly? How do body practices influence the social performance of individuals? How does their importance affect daily life or self-confidence in social and private contexts?

The skin is the largest organ of the body and divides us from the rest of the world (Anzieu, 2005). Through our skin we perceive the environment around us, and we establish social contacts that mould who we are. At the same time, bodies are observed from the outside – evaluated, classified, and hierarchised; and this social evaluation has multiple consequences for the individual. The post-essentialist and modern body is not only the mirror of the self (Shilling, 1993), but is also a device to emotionally experience and socially communicate the self (Giddens, 1991).

Bodies collect and reproduce socio-cultural norms, ideals, and expectations, becoming encumbered with symbolic meanings connected to moral characteristics (Skelly, 2018), such as integrity, discipline, proper conduct, or self-control. Wilfully or not, the appearance of the body reflects socially appropriate behaviour that we adopt because we are “responsible” people, “we are worth it” or “we love ourselves” (Pussetti, 2021).

In an entrepreneurship approach of the self (Foucault, 2008, p. 226), the project *Excel-The Pursuit of Excellence* explores long-term and non-therapeutic body modifications realised to empower the body capital through what we called “enhancing technologies”. The body interventions correspond with the improvement of social performance, increasing the possibility of success in a job interview or in other life projects, for instance. The research we have conducted during the last five years on biomedical enhancement interventions to make people stronger, smarter, and happier points to the existence of a logic of excellence (re)produced on and through bodies for the purpose of improving social conditions.

Bodies are not simply given to us: we are considered responsible for them, called to take action and create plans to perform the best version of ourselves, to be excellent or perfect. But what does excellence mean? Social pressures of perfection are experienced not as external obligations but as personal desires: we do not *have* to be beautiful, eternally young, thin, fit and muscled; we *want* to be like that. However, a ‘perfect body’, according to hegemonic canons, is not enough: the ‘excellent body’ needs also to be authentic, original, and unique, in a life-long commitment toward the flesh as symbolic self (Manfredi, 2022).

While conducting questionnaires and qualitative surveys on a national scale has proved to be important for revealing prevailing beauty trends and

THE HACKED BARBIE.

A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

aesthetic procedures, ethnography provided the central tool of research, employing participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, life stories, and self-ethnography. In order to address pandemic restrictions, in 2021, the research team proposed a series of online workshops as a dissemination and knowledge co-construction activity: *The Hacked Barbie*. This participatory and artistic method is one of the possible experimental practices of fieldwork that Chiara Pussetti has elsewhere defined as “art-based ethnography” (2013, 2017, 2018).

In the workshop, participants were invited to reproduce themselves as a Barbie, re-creating the procedures they direct to their skin, reflecting on the motivations behind everyday bodily practices that characterise who they are, the relationship with themselves and with others through the body. The Barbie – plastic and hegemonic body par excellence, symbol of a Eurocentric ideal beauty – was chosen as the device to (re)think and de-invisibilise practices, emotions, shame, and other forms of social pressure for excellence (Coffey & Ringrose, 2016; Fusaschi, 2013). The exercise of re-creating the social pressure we feel in our bodies on the plastic flesh of the doll forces us to examine social expectations with increased awareness, promoting a critical perspective and a chance for self-questioning about unspoken topics.

Within an artistic participative methodology, Chiara Pussetti and Federica Manfredi started to facilitate participants in developing an anthropological sensibility of their own bodies. The manipulation of the Barbie's perfect and unreal body – a critical mirror for our unique corporeality – offers a critical perspective of our daily habits, in the messages we absorb from advertisement or social media, or on the clichés that reproduce expectations linked to social variables, such as gender, age, social class, and so on. At times these messages or ways of thinking about bodies and beauty practices are taken for granted, to the point that they easily become invisible under the moral pressure to perform the body “properly”. In this context, the Hacked Barbie workshop was proposed to develop awareness and to (de)construct the pressure of excellence, embodied and reproduced as desire(s).

In the 2-3 weeks prior to the workshop, participants were guided via email to produce their own hacked Barbie. The first step was the selection of the doll: What bodies are reproduced in toy shops or online? Do they have common features or are multiple beauties/bodies available?

Having chosen a doll that permitted a comfortable identification process, participants were then free to modify, cut, dye, draw, smooth, or add curves and edges, as well as to make or design clothes and accessories with

THE HACKED BARBIE.

A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

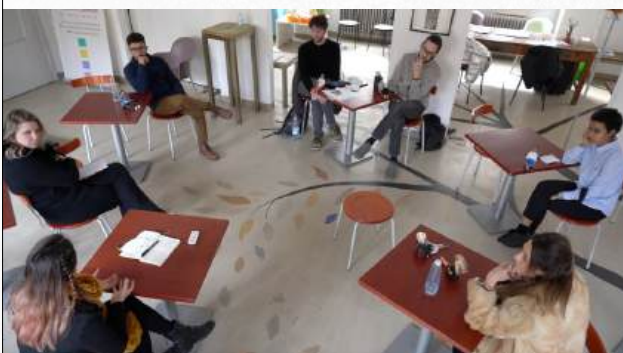
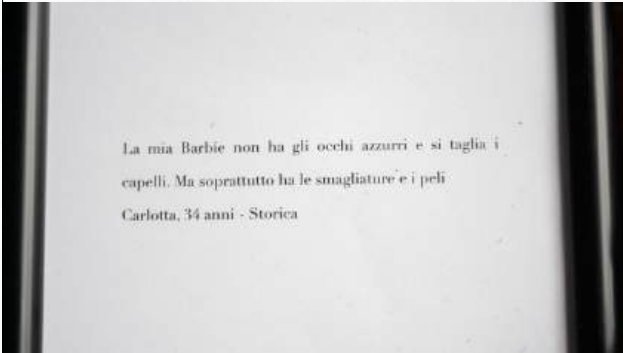
representational significance. Exploring individual creativity through the use of different materials and colours, the sum of the actions was supposed to reproduce the body of the protagonist.

Getting to a nice final result was not the purpose; rather, the experience aimed to formulate new questions. Using the hacked doll for reflexive purposes, in whatever direction their imagination took them, participants were invited to take pictures and notes of the process to finally present at the workshop meeting. During the discussion, whether online or in-person, participants shared private experiences, discovering similarities and differences.

The *Hacked Barbie* was created in February 2021 and has been conducted on seven occasions so far, collecting sixty-three voices, mainly from women based in Brazil, Portugal, Italy, Denmark, Germany, and England, aged between twenty-three and seventy-one years old, and coming from a wide range of professional and economic backgrounds. Online workshops allowed people from different corners of the world to cooperate with relatively low costs and in the emotional comfort of their homes, while also circumventing the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. During in-person settings, however, the co-presence in the same room created powerful synergies, unexpected solidarity, and a positive emotional atmosphere that supported the sharing of personal fragility, even among people meeting for the first time.

Often participants experienced tears and laughter, vulnerability and progressive awareness of expectations and motivations behind cosmetic treatments or clothing strategies, as well as of the pressure to have young, cisgender, competitive, and beautiful bodies as evidence of personal success. At the *[e]motion - I Graduate Conference on Science and Technology of the Arts*, held in Porto, Chiara Pussetti and Federica Manfredi presented some insights from a selection of Barbie dolls produced at the workshops, which revealed the richness of meanings related to aging, waxing, and/or other cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery. The handcrafted collection constitutes a dissemination tool; hence, the audience engaged in a committed debate, noticing the fruitful applications of the workshop in educational and therapeutic domains, and expressing the desire to be involved in future editions of the workshop.

The audiovisual essay accompanying the present text, edited by film-maker Francesco Dragone, illustrates an in-person edition of one of the workshops conducted during the *World Anthropology Day 2022 at the Casa delle Donne di Milano* (Italy).



**THE
HACKED
BARBIE.**
A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was produced as part of the project EXCEL - The Pursuit of Excellence. Biotechnologies, enhancement and body capital in Portugal, funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (grant agreement no. PTDC/SOC-ANT/30572/2017), which coordinated by PI Chiara Pussetti at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa. The scientific research that constituted the base for its development also originates from the doctoral project "Learning to Fly", conducted by Federica Manfredi and supported by the

**THE
HACKED
BARBIE.**

A Workshop Series
to (De) Construct
Contemporary Bodies
and Social Pressure

European Social Found (ESF) and the Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT grant SFRH/BD/131914/2017). The visual product, edited by Francesco Dragone, was co-financed by ADOI (Associazione Dermatologi-Venereologici Ospedalieri Italiani e della Sanità Pubblica).