

Somatic experiences of hyper-connection: *Un Mundo Raro* by Mercedes Azpilicueta

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When interacting with the Net, I rewire myself: my net-extension defines precisely how my material body defined me in the old biologic culture; I don't have an exact weight or measure, I can only be measured in relation to my connectivity,¹
Roy Ascott

The 'mille plateaux' of tweets, blogs, and Instagram and Facebook postings have created a culture of deep confusion. Fragmentation was supposed to enrich us, so why are we now paying the bill for all its unforeseen consequences?²
Geert Lovink



Mercedes Azpilicueta, *Un Mundo Raro*, Performance, 20:00 min., 2015. Ph. courtesy of the artist.

¹ Roy Ascott is a British artist born in 1934. He works with cybernetics, digital art and telematics since 1960. The quote is from Paula Sibilía, *El hombre postorgánico, Cuerpo, subjetividad y tecnologías digitales* (*The Postorganic man. Body, subjectivity and digital technologies*) (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 63. Translation my own.

² Geert Lovink, "Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design", *e-flux Journal*, Vol. 83 (June 2017): 1-10.



Mercedes Azpilicueta, *Un Mundo Raro*, Performance, 20:00 min, 2015. Ph. courtesy of the artist.

With the incorporation of miniature technological extensions carrying our virtual identities and agendas (e-mail, personal contacts, social media, newspapers, etc.), body language has been transformed. The promises of freedom and liberation of communication come along with an unconscious “robotisation of our gesture”,³ explains Eric Sadin in his book, *Augmented Humanity*. Furthermore, new pathologies affecting the brain and the body have also arrived alongside the use of new digital media. Panic attacks, attention disorders and anxiolytics are now a part of the normal state of anxiety in contemporary life. Despite being widely acknowledged, these pathologies are treated as curable symptoms rather than the tip of an iceberg in a much deeper equation. The most radical examples are *Hikikomoris* in Japan who, isolated by social fear, lock themselves in their room, having social contact only virtually. These people considered to be Internet addicts, can spend more than fourteen hours on the web, playing online games or on social media, and stop paying attention to basic human needs. There are now specialized therapies and recovery clinics for treating these cases.⁴

³ Éric. *La humanidad aumentada. La administración digital del mundo* (The Augmented Humanity. The digital management of the world) (Buenos Aires: Caja Negra Editora, 2017), 60. “So far achieved freedom has turned into the takeover of robotized gestures”. Translation of my own.

⁴ In the U.S. there is a programme called reSTARTLife, whose slogan “LIFE. not your device” presents its services provided inside a luxury residence installation. It targets 13 to 18-year-old teenagers and young adults from 18 to 30, who spend \$25.000 in the first four weeks for an intensive recovery programme in

Alongside new discussions of a society of anxiety are further conversations related to mental health and exhaustion. During 2017, a tweet posted by a woman showed an exchange with her boss in which she informed the office that she was taking some days off to take care of her mental health. After uploading it to the web, this went 'viral', gaining the attention of the news.⁵ What caused so much fuss around the matter was the answer the boss gave to the woman thanking her for reminding them all how important is to bring "our whole selves"⁶ into the office. It seems, as Roy Ascott claimed enthusiastically in the beginning of the digital revolution, that our bodies have dematerialised and we can only be measured in relation to our connectivity. Nevertheless, new human resources trends encourage more holistic understanding of the self at Silicon Valley campuses, where employees practice meditation and mindfulness to boost productivity.

Between 2015 and 2016 I devoted myself to the act of observing, processing and thinking through *Un Mundo Raro* an investigation by artist Mercedes Azpilicueta, composed by a performance and a video-installation showed for the first time at RijksakademieOPEN in Amsterdam in 2015. More precisely, I was interested about the potency of a performance in which a deformed body in a state of serious suffering, pushed the limits of the skin, intensified its rhythm of breath, until collapsing in some kind of struggle with herself.

Inside of me, these works were raising questions about whether the attention economy and its effects could have a different potential when mobilised from body to body. In other words, whether the spirit of the performer's body could interpellate the unconscious cells of the viewer's brain, while shaking its body at the same time.

which they share the apartment with other addicted people. Patients are only allowed regular phones without internet and can only check their e-mails in the library. They also provide a programme for the patients' families. Most of the reported cases are men mostly addicted to internet gaming, porn and blogging. For more information see "Net Addiction Recovery", <https://netaddictionrecovery.com/academics/our-curriculum.html> [Accessed July 27th, 2017]. Therapeutic consultations regarding Internet addiction had doubled in Argentina from 2010 to 2011. Techno-addictions represent between 20 and 30% of the consultancies that the phone network for public therapeutic assistance in Buenos Aires receives. Specialized professionals have founded a consultancy office aiming to 'reconnect to the activities of life'. For more information see <http://reconnectarse.com.ar/> [Accessed July 27th, 2017].

⁵ Tomasz Frymorgen, "The woman challenging mental health stigma with her Out Of Office", BBC news, July 13th, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/item/cc1ab625-3180-4017-b8c8-5e54b4828d4b> [Accessed July 31st, 2017]. Also "Can you talk about your mental health to your boss?", BBC news, July 13th, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-40595427> [Accessed July 17th, 2017].

⁶ Ibid.

Un Mundo Raro (A Rare World)

In 2015, Mercedes Azpilicueta (b. 1981, in La Plata, Buenos Aires. Lives and works in The Netherlands), presented the project *Un Mundo Raro (A Rare World)* at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. This consisted of a performance and a three-channel video-installation portraying a woman dressed up in athletic clothes, pushing the limits of her body. The project departed from a study around affects and emotions, from 16th century Charles Le Brun portraits and Baruch Spinoza's third part of the *Ethics*. It asked questions about the essence of human nature and the drive towards competition, instantiating a fight between the rational and the impulsive sides of the mind. Sound and image both had relevant roles in transmitting a haptic sensation to the spectators, like an equation to understand with the body. The performance's intensity was so overwhelming that confronting it seemed to produce a neural-shock in the encounters, re-activating a new sensitivity.



Mercedes Azpilicueta, *Un Mundo Raro / A Rare World*, synchronized three-channel video projection, 13:00 min. loop, 2015. Ph. courtesy of the artist.

The performance took place in a white unpolluted studio, where the artist layed down in a stretching pose waiting for the public to come in. Wearing an Adidas outfit with an 'armour chic' look, set the performance firmly inside the world of our contemporary consumer society. The environment of deep concentration and meditation introduced the spectator into what resembled a yoga practice. But all of a sudden, the performer started crawling, transforming herself into a more animalistic character, who looked to an environment where she did not belong. Her gaze held a look of anxious mistrust and expectation. After a while, she transitioned into an eerie human being, who screamed in shrilly pain. She incorporated gently, with her head looking to the floor, while moving her hands and her hips, and mumbling a song. Then, she started singing in Spanish, "And if they want to know about your past, it will be necessary to tell a lie, **say that you come from a strange world**, that you don't know how to mourn, that you don't understand love, and you have never loved"— and she continued, "When they tell you about love and dreams, and they offer you the sun and the whole heaven, if you remember me, don't

mention me, because you'll feel the love of a good guy."⁷ These lyrics by Chavela Vargas (b. 1919, Costa Rica – 2012, Mexico) are deeply charged with affection and feminine heart-breaking tenderness. The intensity of the performance increased with the sound of her voice. She felt back again, bending her body towards the floor, while blowing her fingers to mark the rhythm of her next transition. The new character, was a physical trainer calling to "lift the heart to the ceiling"⁸ while speeding up the sequences variation and breath-takes. The rhythm of the voice and breath accelerated and the performer transformed into the trainee, increasing the tension with the concatenated exercises. As in a swimming competition, she accelerated the heartbeat until surrendering into exhaustion. In a state of fragility, the performer felt back into the floor, and started crawling like an animal once again. Her mind seemed to be struggling in a schizophrenic transition of multitasking competitiveness, with no time to think or to process. In a Darwinian logic of adapting to survive, the only moment of rapturing conscience was embedded in Vargas' affective words. In a process of desensitised perception and attention, this mind was able to detach, and reclaim the power of the encounter with love. Hence, it is in the body of the other that she found a fissure into the operative automatic mode.

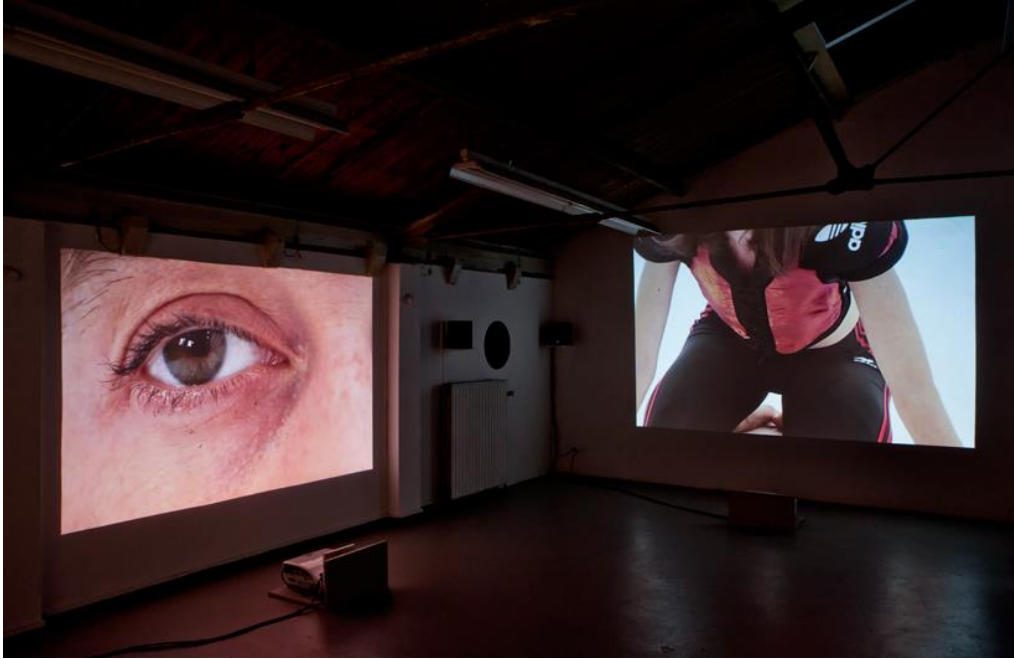
This body can also be thought to represent the contemporary brain of digital economy, subsumed in operative tasks, struggling to accelerate its cognitive faculties. The performance unfolded as a response to external stimulus but with an inner impulse to try to calm down. Notwithstanding, she couldn't. A more instinctive part of her was driven into competition and the conduction of tasks that spiralled until losing control. In the end, this mind found itself trapped and alienated in a world to which she did not belong. Following this alternation, the performance oscillated between instinct and emotion as ways to disrupt a lobotomized abstracted self. In times of networked economy, operating through psycho and technological automatisms, *the general intellect is looking for a body*.⁹ Perhaps in this sense, the rediscovery of the body senses and emotions may be the only way out.

In the second part of *Un Mundo Raro*, the images of the three-channel-video installation immersed the spectator in a fragmented vision of an idiotic body emitting guttural sounds. Image and sound were equally strong in pursuing a physical transmission into the spectators' senses. The screens showed close-ups of a different performance with the same character dressed in the Adidas armour. But this time, actions were developed in the form of simple tasks. The performer fingered her nostrils, touched her eyelids, inflated her cheeks and nipped them; and finally, she breathed. Her autonomy and agency were reduced as she has disintegrated into bits and pieces, subsumed in idiotisation. Each of these parts were mobilised in absurdly repetitive small actions; probably as a way of recognition. Is this a self at stage zero? Or the aftermath of a burned-out? In a world where language does no longer exist, humans will only communicate by guttural sounds. How does a human behave before cultural indoctrination?

⁷ Lyrics translation of Chavela Varga's song, "Un Mundo Raro". See "Lyric Translate" <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/un-mundo-raro-strange-world.html> [Accessed August 18th, 2017].

⁸ Quote from the video. Mercedes Azpilicueta, *Un Mundo Raro*, Performance, 18min., 2015, Rijksakademie Open Studios, Amsterdam.

⁹ This expression coined by Berardi, borrows the concept 'general intellect' from the Italian post-operaist movement (Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato and Christian Marazzi) that refers to the cognitive and emotional capacities of the brain exploited by the semiotic economy. In this sense, the philosopher calls the attention for reconnecting with a body that has been left aside in the organization of the digital economy. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, "Cognitarian Subjectivation", *e-flux* Vol. 20 (November 2010): 1-8.



Mercedes Azpilicueta, *Un Mundo Raro / A Rare World*, synchronized three-channel video projection, 13:00 min. loop, 2015. Ph. courtesy of the artist.

Will this be the resulting fragmentation of the human mind? The screens in the video-performance showed close-up of the eyebrows, the mouth, the tongue, the eyes, the pores of the performer's body. She played with her flesh, and tried to expand it beyond its limits. Restlessly, she inhaled and exhaled, connected to her animalistic and instinctive side.

The two parts of Mercedes Azpilicueta's project comprehend the two sides of a coin; on the one hand, we may observe the connective paradigm of expressive acceleration and competition, which pushes the human body and the mind within a spirit of euphoria and ecstasy, extremely hard to keep constantly. On the other, we see the aftermath of the process of info-stimulus acceleration. The same subject is depicted in an anhedonic state, rehabilitating her emotional and physical desensitization.¹⁰ While activating the senses of its spectators, Azpilicueta actualises the Spinozan question, *what is the body capable of?*¹¹ A question that has become an urgent matter for our becoming-virtual.

In a world ruled by a paradigm of automatisisation, the obligation to self-design, the demand of being productive, and the becoming-fragmented of the contemporary human: can these kinds of artistic practices set the aesthetic conditions towards another kind of perception, one of the body?

"Somatic experiences of hyper-connection: *Un Mundo Raro* by Mercedes Azpilicueta" (2018-2019) is a text adaptation from a longer written Dissertation titled *Lightening the Existential Vacuum* delivered at Goldsmiths, University of London, Department of Visual Cultures, and tutored by Irit Rogoff in 2017. The investigation is still on-going. Both the dissertation as this text belong to the first part of it, developed while in London.

¹⁰Ibid, 89.

¹¹ See Proposition II in Baruch Spinoza, "Part III", *Ethics*, (Buenos Aires: Egebe, 2008), 117. "The fact that no one until now has determined what is a body capable of...".