Praxis

Collaboration, media, praxis: Haptic/Visual Identities Project

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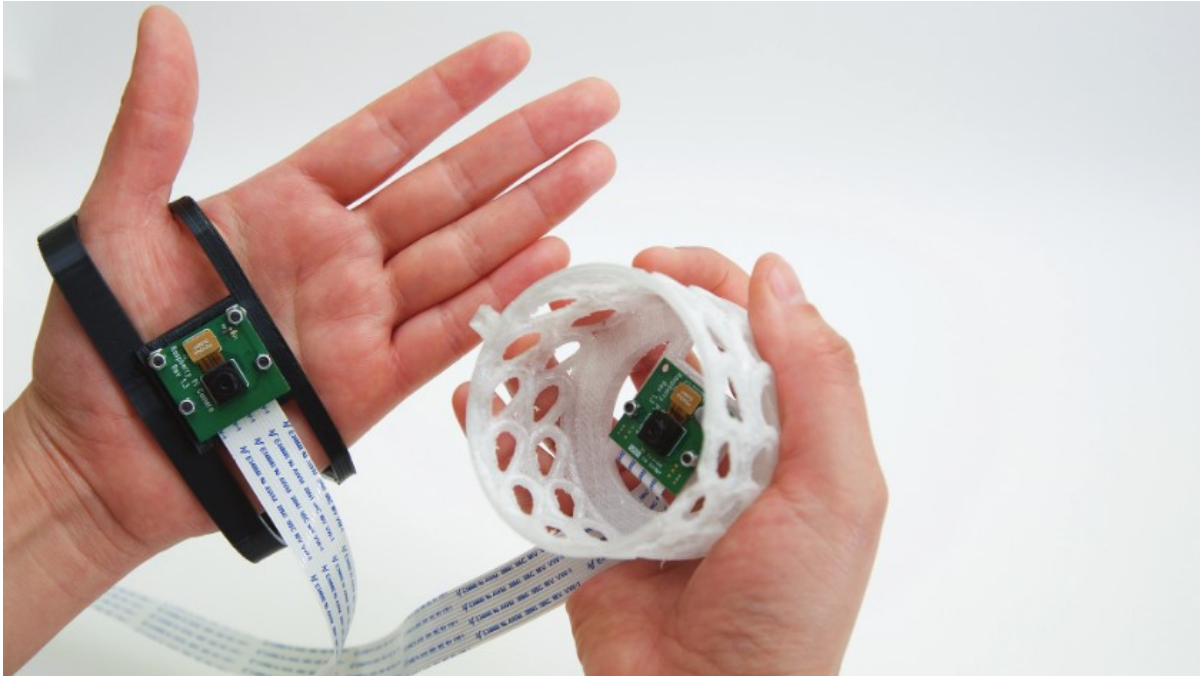cristian.villavicencio@uartes.edu.ec

Art as Research

Haptic/Visual Identities project is a combination of art practice with media and critical theories and development of own tools (DIY technology), thus it is also an attempt at combining practical and theoretical knowledge in one all-encompassing process. The questions and interests, which lead us, as well as different backgrounds we bring to our collaboration create a situation of synchronically pursued different paths of approaching the production, dissemination and presentation of the work. This means no clear institutional context, but at the same time freedom from necessity to adjust to or even to produce for a specific setting, e.g. academic article, art gallery, film display. Our work does not have clear boundaries in what in it is academic, what is visual, what is performative, what is technological, what is critical thinking, therefore we found ourselves in need for a framework incorporating more than one of these parts. Our works seemed to be at an intersection of many issues. Eventually, we realized that the closest idea to what we were doing was the concept of art as research proposed by Hito Steyerl:

> ...artistic research projects in many cases also lay claim to singularity. They create a certain artistic set up, which claims to be relatively unique and produces its own field of reference and logic. This provides it with a certain autonomy, in some cases an edge of resistance against dominant modes of knowledge production (2010).

Thus the questions driving our work have been: how can we put more emphasis on sense of touch, and challenge the dominant ways of
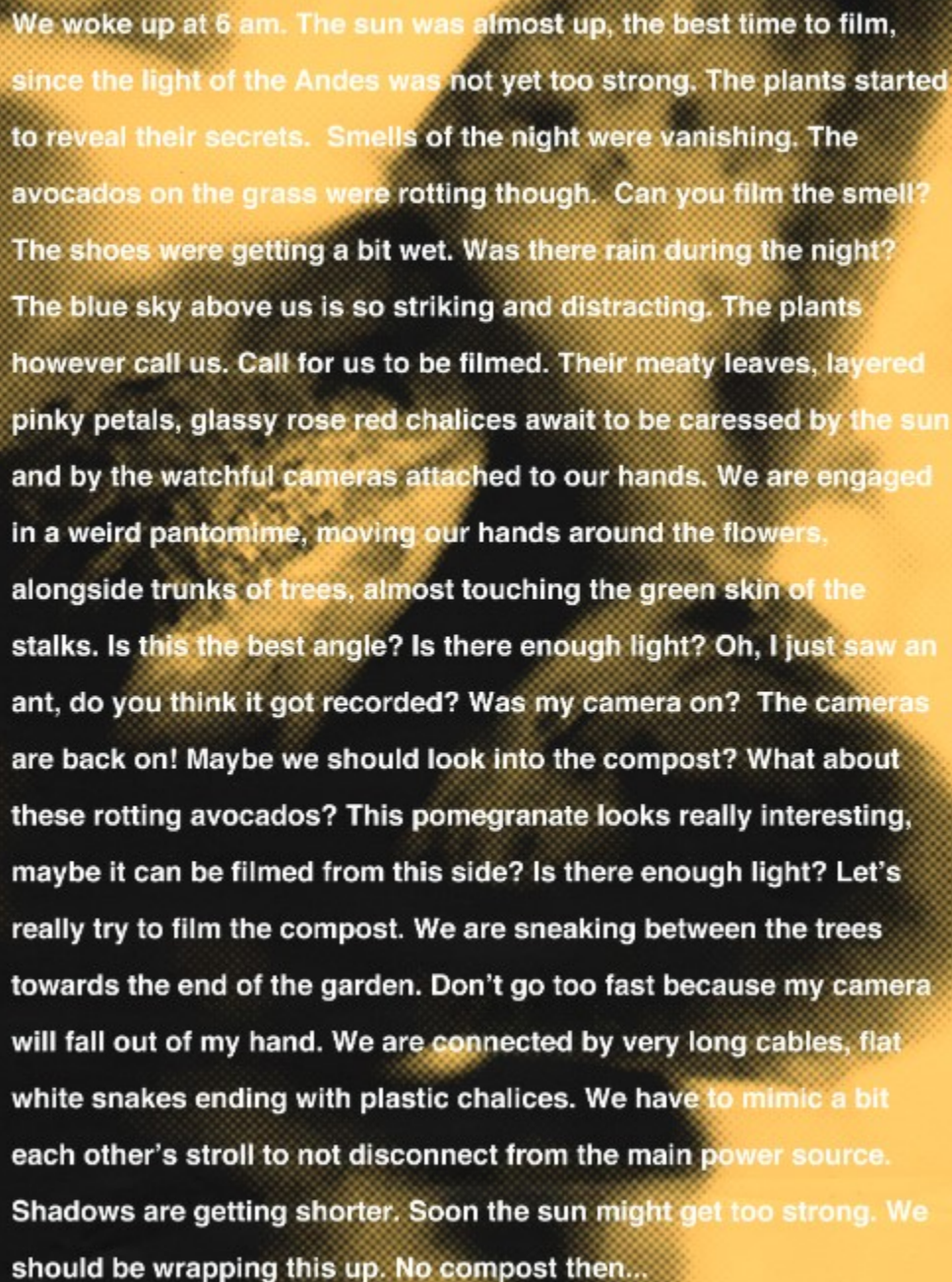
representation centered on vision? How can we film effectively in a collaborative and performative way? Further questioning includes the role of the body in the production of moving images and discussion of moving subject relating itself to the flow and randomness of an unstable image.

Methods of production

Writing on methods of production needs a separation of fields, which are happening simultaneously. The exercise of writing, a rather linear mode of representation, is a certain approximation of our process. For the sake of clarity, we divided it into: praxis, documentation and research. But we find ourselves struggling with the unclear boundaries of such preliminary and unstable partitions of our project.

Praxis

Filming and editing have a lot to do with a kind of device we use and a way in which the device is programmed. Our focus on touch, or rather haptic visuality (Marks, 2000), brings to the process specific ways of filming (close proximity, macro-shots etc.), and fragmentation of output. Editing follows even more the paradigm of experience of touch in an attempt at rendering it with moving image device when on spot it creates randomized filmed material. In some of our tests and works, the output is displayed live either on a screen or in goggles worn by recording performers. Depending on the space of real-life exhibitions or film presentation, we were able to adjust our work to the circumstances of such events, which we will talk more about.

We woke up at 6 am. The sun was almost up, the best time to film, since the light of the Andes was not yet too strong. The plants started to reveal their secrets. Smells of the night were vanishing. The avocados on the grass were rotting though. Can you film the smell? The shoes were getting a bit wet. Was there rain during the night? The blue sky above us is so striking and distracting. The plants however call us. Call for us to be filmed. Their meaty leaves, layered pinky petals, glassy rose red chalices await to be caressed by the sun and by the watchful cameras attached to our hands. We are engaged in a weird pantomime, moving our hands around the flowers, alongside trunks of trees, almost touching the green skin of the stalks. Is this the best angle? Is there enough light? Oh, I just saw an ant, do you think it got recorded? Was my camera on? The cameras are back on! Maybe we should look into the compost? What about these rotting avocados? This pomegranate looks really interesting, maybe it can be filmed from this side? Is there enough light? Let's really try to film the compost. We are sneaking between the trees towards the end of the garden. Don't go too fast because my camera will fall out of my hand. We are connected by very long cables, flat white snakes ending with plastic chalices. We have to mimic a bit each other's stroll to not disconnect from the main power source. Shadows are getting shorter. Soon the sun might get too strong. We should be wrapping this up. No compost then...

Documentation: "phenomenological writing"

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One thing, we used to translate this experience better is a sort of 'phenomenological' description of the process of filming. Alongside photos, and films, we produce we arrived at writing these 'reports' or first person descriptions of subjective observation of the collaborative filming performance and preparation. One such report became an exhibited part of Garden Exercises work, as we felt it belong together with the moving image.

Research

We see research in: thinking as doing, writing as recording and reading as being informed. This last part is generally a theoretical language acquisition, which allows us to move further with many non-conceptualized ideas, and also eventually cross outside the different theoretical frameworks. We are concentrated especially on following terms: body, micropolitics, media, haptic visuality. We also discuss the technology, the building of it, its mediality, as well as its conceptual and social/cultural background such as Do-It-Yourself technology and DIY politics/economy.

The Apparatus

How our device is built is a good representation of the lack of clear boundaries between the mentioned 'parts' in our work, because there is a circular connection between praxis, research and recording which informs how the device is being set up, adjusted, coded, developed, and used. And in turn, how the device works influences our praxis, research, and eventually exhibiting.

In this context, it should be understandable that we have been developing and adjusting Haptic Cameras, a prototype that uses open-source hardware and software with a DIY approach to technology, as we go along. Vilem Flusser famously presents the photographer as nothing more than a "functionary" of that apparatus (1984). In this project we understand the role of the artist as an agent capable of modifying and subverting the existing filming apparatus, and to expand the capabilities and possibilities of technological systems proposed by the industry (that is, by modifying the existing devices and combining them with Open Source hardware and software).

DIY technology attempts to be more independent from the contemporary capitalist relationships in global market; that is, "... hackers, artists, and activists (...) redeploy and repurpose corporately produced content or create novel properties of their own, outside the standard system of production and consumption." (Ratto & Bolder, 2014, p. 3) Although, it has been constantly attempted successfully to

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include DIY production one way or the other in the capitalist system, the DIY communities manage to be on the outskirts of the capitalist domain by finding new ways to resist.
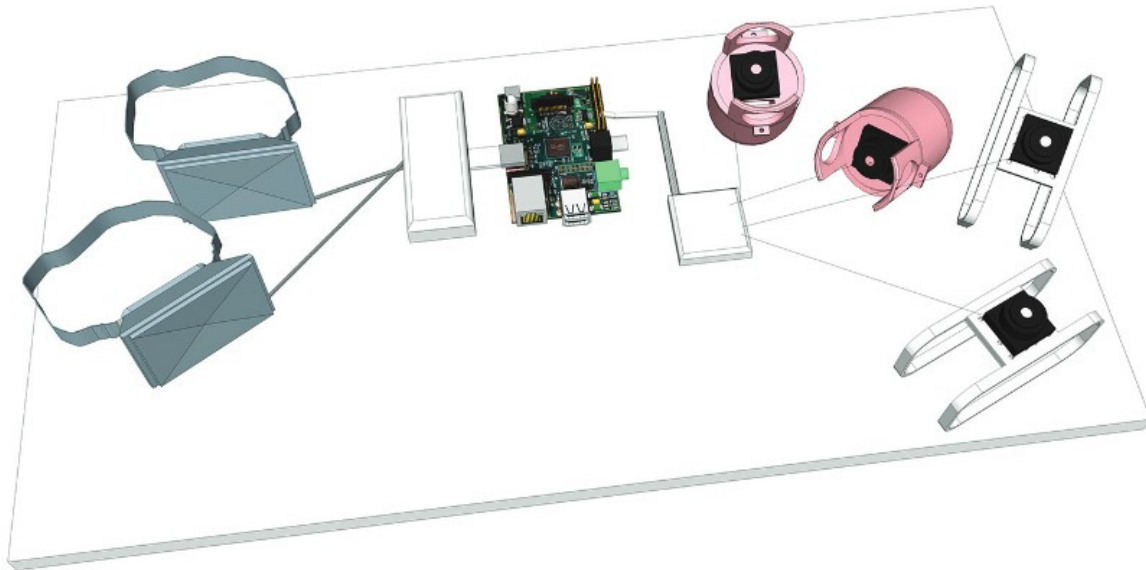
Figure 2

Prototype equipped with: a Raspberry Pi running on Linux, a portable battery, an LCD screen, VR googles and 4 cameras custom-designed with 3D technology to "touch", or scan, and attached to users' hands; lenses are customized to take macro shots of surfaces. Device captures real-time footage of one or more users performing filming.

We started to explore the perception through thus set up digital device by cooperative filming of the surroundings. Additionally in this first attempt, a coded script randomly switched the cameras on and off, producing video footage of a fragmented landscape.

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Figure 3, 4
Haptic cameras used in field recording

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```
    gp.output(7, True)
    gp.output(11, True)
    gp.output(12, False)
    capture(4)
    # time.sleep( 1 )

for x in range(0, 15):

    def capture(cam):
#   time.sleep(2)

      # a = time.time()
    a = time.localtime()
    b = time.strftime("%y_%m_%d_%H_%M_%S", a)
      # print a

      cmd = ("raspivid -t 5000 -w 1280 -h 720 -fps 25 -b 15000000  -o /home/pi/multicam/20%s.h264") % b
      os.system(cmd)
#time.sleep(2)

    if __name__ == "__main__":
      main()

      gp.output(7, False)
      gp.output(11, False)
      gp.output(12, True)
      (x)


subprocess.call(['./2016_01_08opyAndCleanMulticam.sh'])
```

Figure 5

Part of haptic cameras own code built on the arducam model code.

www.arducam.com

This experience related to working and understanding the role of the eye, the body and the machine prompted our interest in Crary's Techniques of the Observer. His question: "How is the body, including the observing body, becoming a component of new machines, economies, and apparatuses, whether social, libidinal or technological? In what way is the subjectivity becoming a precarious condition of interface between rationalized systems of exchange and network of information?" (1992, p. 2) informs the further development of our work. In the context of changing relationships between digital image-making devices and the human body, we have started to understand that in our prototype —when the eye is deferred to the hands to capture images through the logic of touch, the body blends with the camera.

This displacement of eye implies a reconfiguration of how images are taken; it implies a different approach to distance and a particular way of dealing with space, typical for touch. That is: a fragmentary, not totalizing, way of representing space. Such way of using a camera (with digital randomization and fragmentation as well as with the close proximity of the lens toward recorded object) also reconfigures the relationship between the person that takes the image and the subject/object being 'taken'.

Haptics

Our focus on touch comes from the need to question visual hegemony. It is the privileged visual, which smoothens out surface of perception by removing all contradictions (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 62) and allows for monadic (non-pluralist) experience of perception, and eventually representation. It makes embodied experience of perception invisible. The haptic, as much as it can be filmed experience, allows for reestablishing body's role in film representation. Therefore, it allows for pluralist experience, and according to Laura Marks is typical for intercultural (2000, p. 131) (we would say 'minor'[1]) and experimental cinema.

In her book Skin of the Film she describes haptic visuality as connected not only to use of close ups in filming, but also to fragmentation of perception, that is, to what is for her more holistic bodily experience activating more senses than vision as it happens in memory (Marks, 2000, p. XII). She also mentions how focus on touch allows for the viewer for a more embodied experience of such filming footage (Marks, 2000, p. 2).

Our experience with haptic cameras along with conscious attempts to create less othering situations in reciprocal filming performance can be described by the juxtaposition mentioned by Laura Marks, that haptics creates the feeling of the intimate (2000, pp.: 2, 5, 117) while vision addresses control (2000, pp.: 131, 152). The haptic use of cameras reveals the limits of intimacy, issues of control and ultimately the power dynamics of defining identity produced by the gaze, since "One cannot touch without being touched" (Marks, 2000, p. 149). Our prototype makes the invisibility of the gaze[2] visible through the physically perceived "invasion" of personal boundaries that occurs when cameras "caress" the body to record. This unusual perspective, and mixing of touch and vision create a deterritorializing[3] experience for the body of participants and possibly for audience as well. In this experience, as we mentioned before, the boundaries are blurred, and creating a clear perception is not straightforward, it is rather pluralist or even polysemic.

Figure 6
Berlin. (Haptic / Visual Identities)
Video. Berlin - 2016. http://www.cristianvillavicencio.net/31_haptic_visual_identities.html

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Figure 7
Still from Haptic Visual Identities Documentation
Video. Bilbao - 2016 http://www.cristianvillavicencio.net/31_haptic_visual_identities.html

Collaboration

A big part of our project has been to develop a filming apparatus, which generates possibilities of other ways of communication in collaborative filming. The visual cognition of surroundings and the other's body has to be produced in coordination with the other participant, acting as either an object of the camera or second performer, because the prototype has its physical limits. It has four cameras attached with 1-meter long cables to the recording system, so the performers have to film in synchrony and close proximity to each other. Practically this means: we walk and move at the same pace and in the same general direction while performing filming. The video from Portbou was made exactly in this way and is a visual expression of the dialogue between two filming performers. The haptic cameras used that way in space create a certain "sensuous geography" (Rodaway, 1994 as cited in: Marks 2000, p. 2), an attempt at nonaudiovisual sense experience still registered visually.

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Figure 8
Portbou (Haptic Visual Identities)
This video is a vision of Portbou (Catalonia) captured in random details of nature, cemetery and Walter Benjamin Memorial.
Video. Portbout 2016. Link to: http://www.cristianvillavicencio.net/31_haptic_visual_identities.html
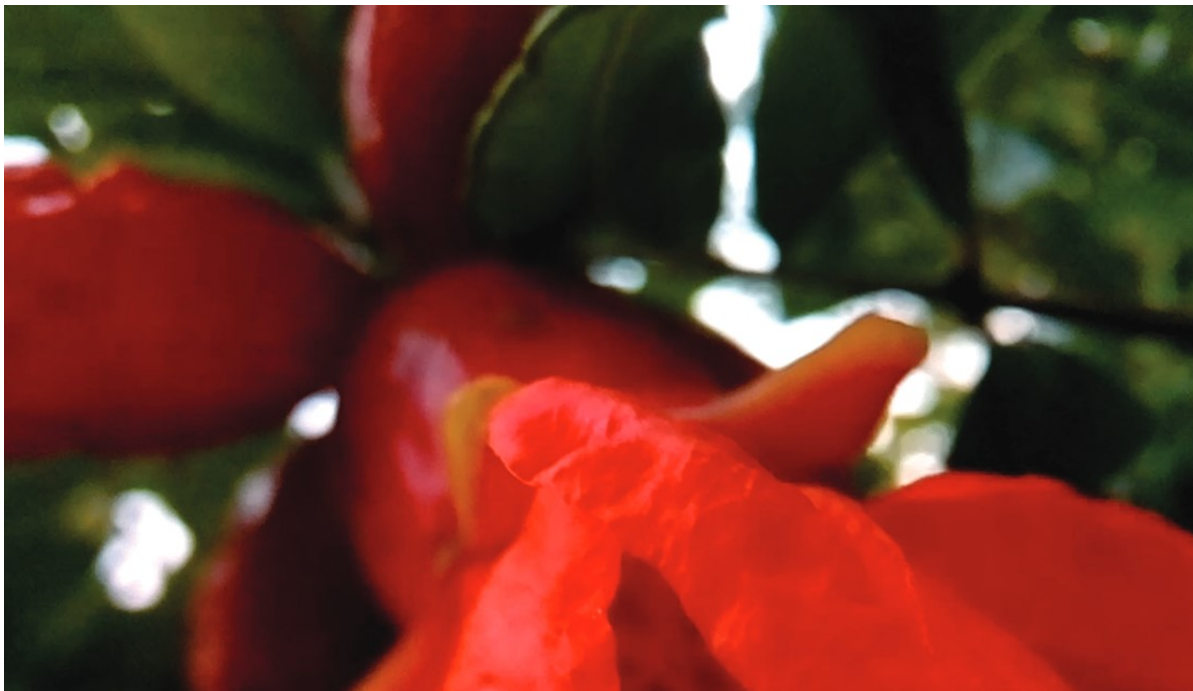
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Figure 9
Garden Exercises (Haptic Visual Identities)
Video. Quito 2017. Link to: http://www.cristianvillavicencio.net/43_gardenExercises.html

Unlike cameras in phones/tablets our prototype is not an individualized, personal, "solipsistic" digital device. It creates a digital reciprocal loop, which turns participants into subjects and objects of perception synchronically, and enables to share a hybrid and fragmented experience of one's own and the other's point of view at different distances and angles. The exploration of this technology as a cooperative performance of (self)representation promises quite positive results in transgressing image identities created in the digital era.

Perception/representation

"...our body is not primarily in space: it is of it." (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 171)

In cases when we filmed surroundings like in Garden Exercises (filmed in Ecuador) or Portbou (filmed in Spain), the reciprocal digital loop of perception and representation of body also takes place. The performative, collaborative, synchronic filming indirectly is a representation of the filming body (bodies of performers). While the output shows the surfaces, plants, flowers and fruits etc., the process of filming involves many elements not present in the footage, the struggle with perception and movement of bodies/machines (hands/

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cameras) being most significant of them. The mentioned earlier description of a phenomenal side of this experience is an attempt at capturing these elements together, as they lead to a creation of a moving-image representation.

"As a recollection-object breaks down, through the engagement with memory, memory generates sensations in the body (Bergson [1911] 1998, p. 179)." (as cited in Marks, 2000, p. 110)

For many intercultural films it is the plants and food, which are the first recollection-objects of sensual but nonaudiovisual nature (see: Marks, 2000, p. 110). It is also the case with Garden Exercises, where the memories of plants, recollection of the place and particular objects, and the recollection of the work put into growing the garden, the actual tangible everyday sensual encounters with them are the background for the intimate meeting through haptic filming with the space of the garden.

Body

Body is not just an object in the world but is "our means of communication with it" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 106) and the world is not an object also but "the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought."(Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 106) The fragmentary character of our videos, whether they are videos of humans or environment, can be seen as an illustration of body's role in perception or understanding. The performative conscious inclusion of body into our filming process could disclose it as the initial medium of cognition and communication. Usually one rather does not realize that the medium, or submedial surface –body, is a channel of communication, focusing rather on the given message. But since the medium becomes the message (Groys 2012)[4], it must be suspected, that is, it needs to be researched as the hidden surface of any initial perception. It cannot however just be turned into a subject of research, it has to be caught in its state of mediating. Our performance of filming can be seen through the question of body mediality (as well as machine mediality) or attempt to point to submedial space in the process of perception and representation.

Figure 10
Photo of Agata Mergler with haptic cameras

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Figure 11
Photo of Cristian Villavicencio with haptic cameras and googles

Performing politics

In the end, the cyborg like situation one finds oneself working with our prototype (mixing body and machine as media) brings us to Katherine Hayles' discussion of the posthuman condition (1999). It includes thinking of the body "as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate," and configuring the human being "so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines." (Hayles, 1999, pp. 2-3) This description is analog to how one learns to use our prototype; the cameras on hands are new prostheses. Furthermore, Donna Haraway's cyborg (1991), the hybrid creature made of machine and organic body is an identity, which "empowers to transgress boundaries standing in the way of political work" (Murray, 2008, p. 39).

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Therefore, in our cyborg-like-situation created with non-mainstream digital DIY tools we see a potential of micropolitics (Deleuze/Guattari, 1987) in form of embodied resistance to the dominant forms of connectivity and identity performance dependent on capitalist, digital, global systems of exchange. The micropolitics proposed by Deleuze and Guattari's Thousand Plateaus: "is the opposite of macropolitics, and even of History, in which it is a question of knowing how to win or obtain a majority." (1987, p. 292) Micropolitics is, in short, knowledge or rather performing of knowledge on how to obtain minority ("become minor").

In our work, having in mind how the haptic cameras operate, this connects to the fact, that the two filming 'cyborgs' should thread gently in their surroundings and empathetically film their objects. And so, in the development of this project, the processual configuration of how technology is used and which technology we want to use expresses our attitude (an attempt at micropolitics) against the high-tech aesthetics and politics of modern technology. Specifically, it means the patriarchal, modernist, and neocolonial values hidden in the narrative of a "neutral" and "progressive" aesthetic. This visual-haptic technology should allow for further exploration in the following subjects: (1) an expansion of the visual and haptic senses; (2) the inclusion of the body's role in the process of image making; (3) randomness in the film output; (4) creating an intersubjective, but non-normative presentation of the self/subject.

Post scriptum: context of presentation

The format of each separate way of presenting our work is limiting and shaping a specific set of circumstances for the work. Our way of dealing with this situation is to present the works in as many different contexts as possible, following the footsteps of other artist/scholars/experimentators[5], to allow our work, which includes also the process leading to the material effects, to be present in its facettes and allow it to thrive as a hybrid we see it is. This hybrid is a complexity built on experience of filming, editing, installing and exhibiting, phenomenological observation and description of own steps and events in each of the works (sometimes written down) and research by which we mean thinking (theoretically and practically) reading and writing.

The methods of presenting – an example of the life of a work

Garden Exercises, presented in Khôra gallery in Quito as part of Bosques (húmedos) Tropicales exhibition, was accompanied by

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posters with a text (mentioned earlier 'phenomenological writing'), which were integral part of the work. The same piece presented in Spain in BilbaoArte Artistic Production Centre as part of Parallel Dimensions exhibition was put in a context of a different art work with which it functioned in a way of a contrast. Our video was a recording taken in a specific geographical and cultural site (a sensuous geography of a garden in Quito), whereas the creation exhibited next to it was a mechanical live-feed filming piece (in BilbaoArte space). This very same Garden Exercises has just been accepted as a short film (compilation of three videos) to Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in Czechia, where it will function without the art gallery context, in section of experimental filming. This will set for Garden Exercises a situation of a cinematic black box.

Figure 12
Garden Exercises
Video. Quito 2017. Exhibited in Khôra Gallery in Quito, 2017.

Figure 13
Garden Exercises
Video. Quito. 2017. Exhibited in Khôra Gallery in Quito, 2017

Figure 14
Garden Exercises
Video. Quito. 2017. Jardín Mixed media. Bilbao 2017. Exhibited in Bolbaoarte in Bilbao, 2017. Photo from:
Villavicencio C. (2017) *Dimensiones Paralelas.* Fundación BilbaoArte

For further information about the Haptic/Visual Identities project please visit the following webpage:
http://www.cristianvillavicencio.net/
31_haptic_visual_identities.html

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Notas

1 "Minor" as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in Kafka Toward Minor Literature has following characteristics: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation". (1986, p.18)

2 An experimentation/discussion of the "male gaze" issue and female agency mentioned by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, L. (2009). Visual and other pleasures. (2nd ed.). Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.), is one of possible directions our project could develop.

3 Deleuze and Guattari define deterritorialization in many ways, "movement by which one leaves the territory" (p.508) it "is never simple, but always multiple and composite"(p.509)

4 Changing famous McLuhan's claim

5 E.g. Hito Steyerl, Lygia Clark, Valie Export, Mieke Bal...

Información adicional

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