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HUMANITY MEASURES ITSELF /////
The Archive of the Lost Embodied
Knowledge

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The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge is a practice-led art project dealing with the opportunities individuals and humanity are losing by handing our mental skills to technology. Experiencing the rapid technological revolution of our era, which is too quick to analyse and digest, we try to navigate the chaos and messiness of life. We appeal to the help of various self-tracking techniques, some of which we are unaware of. By gathering amounts of personal data, we seek to organise and give meaning to daily existence, letting applications mediate our life, body, and mind to ourselves. My research asks whether we lose something, whether we are giving up the deepness and richness of the complexity of life by reducing it to limited technological options provided by technology.

Inspired by the famous dictum attributed to African scholar Amadou Hampâté Bâ: “When an African elder dies, it is as if a whole library is burnt down”, meaning that the loss of knowledge and experience is a loss of opportunities, I created a preserving collection of bodily knowledge, a pearl of wisdom we all have that does not require technology to mediate understanding of our own self. This project aims to create awareness of our mental skills eroding and fading under the shining light of data.

Haya Sheffer is an artist and designer, a PhD practice-based researcher at the art department of the University of Reading and the philosophy department at Cardiff University UK, sponsored by UKRI. Her education and career as an industrial and visual communication designer during three decades of the media revolution shaped her research exploring contemporary culture's social, technological, embodied, and political aspects, raising questions on power, control, metanarratives, and biases. Her current research highlights the influence of self-tracking devices and wearables on how we perceive ourselves and draw a connection between this phenomenon and historical, philosophical, and political evolution.

Sheffer presented her mixed media artwork in solo and group exhibitions in the UK, Germany, South Korea, Italy, and Israel. She lectures at conferences and publishes papers.

Haya Sheffer

Humanity
Measures Itself



THE ARCHIVE OF THE LOST EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

What GPT said that humanity had experienced several major technological revolutions throughout history that had profound and lasting impacts on every aspect of individual and social life, leading to significant changes in the way humans live and interact with the world. But I said that today's technological revolution is singular in its speed, happening during one's life, too fast to diagnose, too quick to digest. In my practice-led research, situated in and through art, I zoom in on contemporary self-tracking devices, one of the overlooked outcomes of this revolution, on how it invades our life and (as Chat GPT said) influences the way we live and interact with the world.

We increasingly use technology to track and self-surveil different aspects of our lives, measuring everything from weight, steps taken, paths walked, the number of friends we have, and what we have eaten. Even breastfeeding a child or our sex life is monitored, quantified, and evaluated in this way. Self-tracking devices and applications proliferate and are heavily marketed to us. My research, "Humanity Measures Itself", grounded in both art and philosophy, focuses on what might be lost when we examine our lives through these applications' standardised and limited outputs, as opposed to experiencing life in all its complicity and richness.

*The red-boxed quotes are collected personal evidence from interviews I made during my research and part of "The Archive of The Lost Embodied Knowledge" project presented further on.

Data Pollution

On a December winter night, while walking in London's streets, I encountered a bizarre phenomenon: I heard robins singing. Birds are not supposed to sing at night, and I was curious to figure out the reason for this change of habits. A quick Google research turned up the answer: light pollution. For us, light is not perceived as pollution; it's an oxymoron. But for robins, light is an important cue to time their daily activities. London's artificial Christmas light decoration polluted the night darkness and changed the synchronisation of their body clock, making them recognise night as day and practice their singing activities.

It was then the first phase of my PhD research, asking questions about how self-measuring, such as wearables and self-tracking devices, affect and change our bodily ways of understanding ourselves. The robin's response to light pollution made me ponder the similarity between how artificial light affects their biological clock and how artificially gathered data affects our bodily ways of understanding the world using our embodied knowledge. Is the unlimited daily data we collect to surveil and track our performance polluting our natural perception of the world? Thinking of data, similarly to light, as a cause for disruption is not intuitive. I started examining the issue under what I coined 'Data Pollution', depicting the self-gathered data as a fog that might pollute and distort our natural skills to view the world.

Who Cares?

One would now ask, who cares? Technology during the modern era gained tremendous achievements that have benefited humanity in many ways; what is the downside of freely choosing to use data to improve our performances and help us navigate modern life? I wish to challenge some prevailing assumptions regarding how we choose and use these new technologies and bring attention to how we are influenced by extending our bodies to technological devices. When our mobile phone needs a charge, we say, “I’m out of battery”, feeling disabled with the switched-off device. Furthermore, we trust the applications and its algorithm (those we chose and those we didn’t) and ‘outsource’ our skills to them, giving technology the responsibility and power to decide for us when to change our baby’s diaper, what would be our ultimate date or what’s the best movie for us to watch. Examining this new behaviour can also reflect the effects of the broader twenty-first-century data and communication revolution on personal and social life.

“I don’t like satellite navigation. I like to have an intuitive sense of direction and where I am. I find that when I use the satnav, I don’t really know where I am. And so, you’re following the satnav, and you get to where you want to go, but you’ve got no idea that you’ve been there, you’ve missed that sense of awareness of your surroundings and the journey you have taken.

(T. 59, Professor of Imaging Sciences)

Capitalist Values

Sociologists believe that the way groups organise their economic activity and produce goods affects their mental world¹. Most of the Western world's population was raised within the context of a capitalist political and cultural heritage, values which we take for granted. A capitalist approach of seeing the individual as labour power, which should be efficiently utilised, is well established in our self-perception. Monitoring, counting, evaluating, organising, hierarchising, optimising, and controlling are values transformed from the economic system into today's private life. They are managed and fuelled by capitalist forces that see the individual and their body as a commercial target. Michel Foucault, the influential twentieth-century French philosopher, claimed that since modernity, new methods for discipline were developed to produce submissive subjects, taking control of their function and the efficiency of their movements, producing the 'docile body'². With the desire to fulfil the above capitalist values, aiming to discipline and tame our bodies to docile in order to achieve better performances, we approached the help of self-tracking devices. Our perception of self-efficiency, which is totally economical and ruthless, is now embedded in technological 'new

“Well, you can basically fill it if you need to breastfeed your baby, but sometimes it was different than what the app suggested. So, in the beginning, there were a few times that I disconnected him or stopped nursing him because the app said: “We just hit the 30-minute mark, you have to stop. You have to stop breastfeeding”. And I felt that it was wrong, but I still followed the instructions, not listening to my own voice or to my sense of self.

(O. 34, Data Visualisation Designer)

organs' that extend our bodies, intending to perform the best of us. For example, a young mother whom I interviewed described her motivation to use a baby-tracker application while breastfeeding her newborn as wanting to be the best mom version of herself. She saw this act of intimacy as a task that should be organised and scheduled into an optimised target. Examining how our analogue self-tracking practice, wishing to fulfil capitalist values, was developed into today's sophisticated digital techniques can highlight the power of technology in this play. This, for instance, could include the potential influence of addictive reward mechanisms embedded in these apps or the limitation of users' response choices to predefined options within applications.

Are we losing something?

The 'so what' question remains on the table. Are we losing something? Focus now on the applications' outputs, that aim to provide a digital summary of real-life situations. The applications are programmed to gather complex data from our messy lives and analyse it, using algorithms and AI, combining it into a single output, simple as possible, easy to follow

“I think that the... I would say that the happiness of being a human is the mysterious nature of how we are, isn't it? It's like you don't have to know everything about yourself. Nor others.

(M. 35, PhD student in Data Analytics)

that will not inquire any deepening: a word of praise, a call to action, numerical data, an award, or an encouraging Gif. “Most recommended, your best meditation session, turn left, stop feeding, your daily score”. Reduction, related to Positivist philosophy, is a scientific ontology of analysing and describing a complex phenomenon in terms of its simplest or fundamental constituents. Summing a lively experience by handling it to devices reduces the richness of the experience into its smallest common factor that can be treated in an objective scientific way, neglecting the reduced unmeasurable material. We can better understand the potential loss through the twentieth-century philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism describing this logical Positivist way of thinking as ‘the blindness and muteness of the data’³, pointing out that reduction of complexity influences the richness of the language (and the complexity of life) into a shallow practical tool. The abandoned subjectivities that were peeled and ignored while ranking our activities are the lost option of ways to experience life. My research focuses on our embodied understanding, the knowledge we use to live the deep, complex situations. It aims to develop an awareness of the loss of authentic ways of understanding the world and the loss of the variety and richness that these skills can provide. An awareness that looks for a post-measuring discourse deconstructing the authority of rationality and offering alternative ways of perceiving ourselves.

“I don’t worry about doing 10,000 steps a day. I walk a lot because I don’t have a car. So I tend to walk. You know, so I know that I’m doing quite a lot of walking without having a machine to tell me. I’ve never had a car, I’ve never driven a car, and I never wanted to drive a car, and I wish a lot of other people didn’t. Bad invention.

(F. 85~ Doctor of Physics and philosophical instruments dealer)

The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge

<https://hayasheffer.com/folio/the-archive-of-the-lost-embodied-knowledge>

Searching for evidence where such embodied knowledge confronted technology, I turned to the public. I interviewed people, recording their stories and thoughts regarding their personal experiences when they use self-tracking techniques of any kind. Inspired by the famous dictum attributed to the African scholar Amadou Hampâté Bâ: ‘When an African elder dies, it is as if a whole library is burnt down’, meaning that the loss of knowledge is a loss of opportunities, I decided to create a preserving collection. An archive that will contain the stories which I collected in the interviews exploring a range of approaches to understanding the world, our bodies and ourselves. I called it The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge.



I recorded the narrated stories (some are quoted in the red boxes above) onto light-sensitive chips and stored them in metal tins. I created an installation, presenting the archive on the gallery's floor in a long row, calling for visitors to explore it. To hear a story, one should bend, pick up a can, open it, let the light-sensitive chip reveal and play the audio, and closely listen to it as if it was a shell on the seashore. The physical act of intentionally picking and listening to the “talking cans” rather than watching a video or passing by a speaker created a bodily experience involving the visitors in the artwork. Once the visitor closed and placed the tin, the audio with its story vanished into the darkness of the metal can, representing the possibility of losing our own embodied knowledge.

Collectively, the archive's testimonials might suggest that humans have a much older wisdom that does not require technology to mediate understanding of our own bodies. My research seeks to amplify this wisdom of embodied knowledge and question whether this human ability is fading, similar to the robin's ability to recognise night under the bright lights of new technologies.

Supervisors: Dr Kate Allen, Dr Mary Edwards, Dr Annabel Frearson



Endnotes

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The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge's website:



<https://hayasheffer.com/folio/the-archive-of-the-lost-embodied-knowledge>

