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Author
Salter, Chris

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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Technologies of Sense: Quantification, Embodiment and Making up People in the Age of the Data Driven Self

Chris Salter

In "Making Up People," philosopher of science Ian Hacking famously argued that the human sciences through counting, correlation and quantification "create new kinds of people that in a certain sense did not exist before." Yet, unlike Hacking's 19th century statistical models, our systems of calculation are based on algorithms, self-organized networks of smart sensor nodes and machine learning within the context of what Andrejevic (2014) has called "the sensor society" – "in which the interactive devices and applications that populate the digital information environment come to double as sensors" and […] "emerging practices of data use complicate and reconfigure received categories of privacy, surveillance, and even sense-making." Simultaneously, our increased habitation within these new sensory environments produces a strange double bind where we are torn between different forms of subject-hood – becoming "new objects" of sensory inquiry (to update Hacking) – and different understandings of what human experience is and can be. One form relies on measures gathered by sensors that track biophysical data to provide a portrait of the self as "quantified," and "conductable" (Foucault), while the other exploits new experiences of sensory-based, bodily-driven affects produced by encounters with multi-modal, real time haptic, visual, acoustic, olfactory and other technologies that organize what Hayek called "the sensory order" in previously unprecedented ways. From worn haptic devices to the tracking of sense modalities on bodies, such "technologies of the senses" are exploited to "make up" new people with heightened sensory awareness who, simultaneously, increasingly rely on numbers as forms of sensory truth and self knowledge. Using examples from recent art practice that critically examine this double bind, this talk explores the construction of a new form of "sensory reason" which only serves to heighten the age old tensions between mind and body, external calculation and felt, "phenomenal" data (Varela).