

BODY AS A WEAPON AIMED AT YOU

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The body transformed to data serves as a powerful weapon of the state. It becomes a biocapital, a carrier spreading the disease at the same time entangling itself in the network of politics, medical services, information distribution, transport, databases etc. The war is being fought via biopolitical body, a gun pointed at you.

The functioning of today's state oscillates around the bodies, the population, the life itself. Life is included into the domain of politics, it is an arm of discipline and control, and it drives biopolitics. The currency of biopolitical state is bioinformation. This data is a universally traded commodity. It is of great value to the security state as it allows for the management, supervision regulation and control of population. A valid comparison can be drawn between the attitude expressed towards bioinformation in modern security state and the Marxist notion of "commodity fetish". Different types of bioinformation are extracted, gathered, accumulated and globally exchanged; from various forms of individual identification, all types of health data, health insurance, through consumer information, to the surveillance of bodies in the public space.

However, it should be pointed out that this information is of a very specific character. In the context of contemporary biopolitics, Eugene Thacker observes, that the information of which we're speaking, the main focus of modern biopolitical state is not only immaterial: "Biopolitics mediates between genetics and informatics. (...) In biopolitics (...) information is not exclusively immaterial or disembodied; information in biopolitics is precisely that which can account for the material and embodied and, furthermore, that which can produce the material, the embodied, the biological, the living - <<life itself>>. Information is the point of mediation through which biopolitics regulates genetics and informatics into a sophisticated mode of governmentality and control." [1] So, one might say, that we're dealing with a unique situation in which flesh is made data and data is made flesh. Thacker delivers examples of this duality of bioinformation: "Genome databases, biological<<libraries>> of cell lines, patient databases at hospitals and clinics, prescription databases, insurance databases, online medical services, and a host of other innovations are transforming the understanding of <<life itself>> into the understanding of informatics. (...) The pills, therapies, test results, diagnostic measures, insurance rates and foods are the material output of this informatic view. In rarer cases, cell therapies, in vitro fertilization, genetic screening, and tissue engineering are a literal instances of this biopolitical condition, in which data is made flesh." [2]

Nevertheless, despite the materiality being an intrinsic feature of bioinformation, once the data is extracted from our bodies, in most cases it becomes inorganic and extraneous. It becomes an abstract code with which we're unable to identify anymore. Our bioinformatic patterns evoke a feeling of estrangement and uncanny unease; what once was homogenous and coherent becomes fragmented, translated into numbers or organic samples and processed to the point when we cannot perceive it any other way but as an abject, which gives rise to rejection. We seem to have reached a point, of which Foucault was speaking in the context of utopian body: "Utopia is a place outside all places where I will have a body without a body." [3] It's not the case that our moist intestines have dried to bytes. Their materiality exists, but as they become incorporated in the intertwining networks of medical services, economy, politics, culture, media and third-party companies, they become owned. Whether in a material or immaterial form, they are absorbed by interlaced networks and then exchanged, circulated and

distributed. In the constant fluid flow of biological exchange, different subjects, different power vectors, appropriate the value of biological information, be they hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, security services, government agencies, independent individuals etc. In biological exchange, this networked, mobile bioinformation is both the input and the product.

Yet since it was directly stated that in the constant process of bioexchange, bioinformation becomes appropriated, fundamental questions remain to linger: Do we own our bodies at all? Do we have the right to trade them, to sell the bioinformation derived from them? Why does my body exist more in the banks, databases than it exists for me? Why has my essential data been converted into commodity and why do influential companies, pharmaceutical moguls, ruling elites, security services freely use and trade it without even bothering to ask for my consent? How is it possible that once it has been extracted from me I am unaware of what my samples are used for and unable to decide about them, although they are my very property? Perhaps we should raise these objections at the level, where biodata is being collected, before it's incorporated into the circulation of the global networks.

Consciousness of ways of gathering bioinformation is of great importance. For are we aware that our every step, every credit card transaction, every email are watched, tracked, filtered and thrown into the fluid information networks? One of the "terminals" that constantly monitors the activity of biopolitical bodies in public spaces turning it into data, are surveillance cameras. They're almost everywhere; the ruthless gaze watches the streets, workplaces, means of public transport, offices, institutions, parks etc. Unfortunately, there are little chances of avoiding their omnipresent eyes. Since they cannot be eluded, they become naturalized and grow into the city's landscape, at the same time abolishing the uneasy feeling of being watched and also, our alertness. Another restrictive branch commonly utilized by security services are biometrics. These are technologies, which allow for the recognition and identification of humans upon their measurable physical or behavioural features. As Emilio Mordini and Sonia Massari indicate: "Current biometrics include fingerprints, ultrasound fingerprinting, iris scans, hand geometry, facial recognition, ear shape, signature dynamics, voice recognition, computer keystroke dynamics, skin patterns, foot dynamics. Future biometrics (second generation biometrics) include neural wave analysis, skin luminescence, remote iris scan, advanced facial recognition, body odour, and so on (...) Also behavioural biometrics – which measure behavioral characteristics such as signature, voice, keystroke pattern and gait – is becoming increasingly important." [4] These systems are becoming commonly used, consequently every time we cross a border, undergo a routine medical check up, visit a bank, or even try to enter a public institution, our intrinsic, innate characteristics are being gathered and included in a database as well as in a global stream of interconnected networks. This biodata may serve commercial institutions, pharmaceutical companies, statistical bureau, and passport control services at the airport just to name a few. They prove useful in cases of profiling people, they may decide upon inclusion or exclusion facilitate human segregation alike eugenics, reveal weak points in human constitution thus delivering instructions where to strike to crash our bare systems or even providing formulas for creating a bioweapon capable of exterminating particular ethnical groups due to their slight DNA differences.

What has to be necessarily highlighted is that these biometrical technologies don't only gather one type of information at a time, relevant for the identification of biocitizens. To use a simple example, when a person is having his or her iris scan taken, additional data such as eye colour, the complexion, which may give some hints as to the ethnic origin, and other signs revealing for instance certain health problems are being collected. Then this data is dispersed and perhaps it doesn't serve only the purpose it was primarily destined for. Situations of this kind are spoken of in terms of "function creep". "Function creep" is the term used to describe the expansion of a process or system, where data collected for one specific purpose is subsequently used for another unintended or unauthorized purpose" [5] This feature cannot

be expelled though, as it is a result of the ways biometrical systems operate and also a characteristic of our fleshy envelopes.

What Mordini and Massari also observe is that article 7 of the EU Data Protection Directive firmly states, “No data collection can go unnoticed by the subject that is being monitored. The goal is that the individual is aware of all types of data about him/her that are collected.” [6] Perhaps this could be a solution to the oppression and terror experienced in almost any dimension of life by biopolitical bodies if it wasn’t for the second part of this article which abolishes binding force of the first paragraph predicating, that it is not applied in cases of ‘processing of data relating to offences, criminal convictions or security measures.’ [7] The law collapses into itself.

Where state reenacts the spectacle of evil, biopolitical bodies choose to accept the ever increasing strengthening of defenses, regulations, as well as terror and hysteria that accompanies them, supporting the conviction that it’s all being done for their protection and safety. Roberto Esposito, in his analysis of the thought on immunization brought by Niklas Luhmann underlines, that “systems function not by rejecting conflicts, but by producing them as necessary antigens for reactivating their own antibodies.” [8] The metaphor of vaccination seems exceptionally accurate when applied to the mechanisms that constitute the roots of security state. Humans intoxicate themselves with a substance which is in a relation with the disease and which may procure some of its symptoms claiming, that this treatment increases their chances to last. But is it vital that we accept and, what is even worse, rationalise this violation, constraint and terror? Are we truly condemned to this destructive constellation of power?

As I have emphasized earlier, the consciousness of mechanisms driving security, or shall we rather say terror state, is of crucial importance, and to some extent it may help to limit the participation of biobodies in the superiorly induced social hysteria. If we remain unaware of these processes, and, what’s even more important, if we don’t realize the position in which we are put, we become pawns in the game. What’s especially important is to simply think for ourselves instead of commissioning this task to the power. Otherwise, choosing ignorance and randomly accepting the arguments delivered by the authorities, we, our biodata, will become a commodity sucked into, and traded via a global network as we perform simple routine activities of everyday life.

Slavoj Žižek suggests that “The problem is not terror as such - our task today is precisely to reinvent emancipatory terror.” [9] Assuming that emancipation is the action of freeing oneself from restraint, I understand this thought as an expression of a necessity of a quest for smart ways enabling biocitizens to limit the destructive impact of security state functioning. But what exactly could these ways be in practice? Firstly I would like to underline what I have stated above, that consciousness is the key stage in directing the guns aimed at biopolitical bodies the other way. It’s a weapon, and, to some extent, also a remedy. To give a simple example: in an outbreak of influenza caused by a new, not thoroughly recognized mutation of a virus, one may refuse to “protect” himself with a vaccination from a questionable source, prepared quickly by some influential pharmaceutical mogul, as an answer for the threat to the body politic, thus eluding the participation in the mass societal panic. On the other hand, there are also other, more radical and drastic possibilities of intervening in the mechanisms of security state, such as adopting its own methods, which, in this case means responding to terror with terror. However, the most common reaction - traditional attacks, be they plane kidnappings, booby-traps or assassinations of people from the pedestal of power, hardly ever prove successful and reach the goal of terrorism which is, as we know, not the military victory, but a change in sociopolitical structures. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that such operations may easily turn against their originators. As Chomsky says:

“React with extreme violence and expect to escalate the cycle of violence, leading to still further atrocities, such as that is inciting the call for revenge.” [10] Thus, it has to be remembered that, to paraphrase Jack Parsons “Terror is a two edged sword”.

It’s particularly for this reason that I see a great potential in utilizing bioweapons for the purpose of counterterrorism, understood here as reacting to the oppressive actions undertaken by state. Although it’s a common persuasion, expressed by great number of experts dealing with the subject of bioterrorism, that bioweapons are completely useless, I find it hard to agree with this perspective. Steve Kurz, in his profound study on the possibilities of bioterrorism, underestimates the effectiveness of bioweapons directly stating that “biological weapons are only what they are—useless junk.” [11] However, I attribute the attitude expressed by Kurz to the fact that he focuses mainly on old, exhaustively researched viruses and bacteria and also examines bioterrorism in terms of military victory and statistics of casualties, not in the symbolic sense. In my opinion, in the conditions of easy accessibility of biodata gathered in databases (for instance open databases facilitated by academic environments or individual scientists), possibilities of intercepting information exchanged in various networks, and a great amount of know-how available at every terminal capable of connecting with the Internet, the chances of producing a new, unknown, transgenic supravirus able to decimate populations, are very high. After all, benefiting from the databases is nothing but getting our biodata back. “In the future, terrorists will be individuals or like-minded people working in very small groups, on the pattern of the technology-hating Unabomber, who apparently worked alone sending out parcel bombs over two decades, or the perpetrators of the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma. An individual may possess the technical competence to steal, buy, or manufacture the weapons he or she needs for a terrorist purpose; he or she may or may not require help from one or two others in delivering these weapons to the designated target. The ideologies such individuals and mini-groups espouse are likely to be even more aberrant than those of larger groups. And terrorists working alone or in very small groups will be more difficult to detect unless they make a major mistake or are discovered by accident.” [12] Taking into account the context of bioterror, I fully agree with Laquer’s opinion, especially on the easy accessibility of materials needed for a terrorist attack and the possibility of operating alone, yet for me, the future is now. It is precisely now that biocitizens may produce subtle, invisible, odourless, undetectable lethal microbes. It is now that they may use their bodies as incubators for viral replication and as carriers spreading the disease at the same time. The disease may be distributed easily and at a great speed through many channels, as a matter of fact, through all places of human flow like transport network, shopping malls, public institutions, schools, workplaces etc. The infection may also occur on a global scale. The only condition is to create yet unknown, unfathomable organism precluding the attacked side from defending. The surprise itself works here as a weapon.

Another option of addressing the issue of unjust practices of security state is interpreting them through the domain of art. Artists may strike various attitudes and one of the commonly used to engage in a critical judgment is “parasitical” feeding upon found sociopolitical structures in order to subvert them and blow their foundations up from the inside. Interesting examples are delivered by Institute for Applied Autonomy in the project *iSee*, which is a web-based application enabling users to move freely around the city space avoiding the gaze of CCTV cameras, by BIOTEKNICA collective, whose interventionist art project raises the issue of commodification of live and of generating and trading organisms on demand, or the *Molecular Invasion* by Critical Art Ensemble, which takes up the form of scientific theatre of participation intended to reverse the process of genetic modification of groceries through experiments with non-toxic, widely available substances.

These are only few examples among a great number of artworks devoted to the issues of various implications of the mechanisms, which drive security state. Unfortunately, the scope of this publication is too limited to elaborate on this point. However, I would like to point to the fact that such artworks not only function in the domain of art, but also effectively intervene in the social order. They make open what was obscured, they uncover what was meant to remain secret and exclusive, thus abolishing the hierarchy present in security state, and moreover, they deliver practical methods of opposing detrimental methods. Since works as such don't confine to the aestheticization of life, rather overcome the distinction between the two dimensions and cause factual changes in the hyperreality of security state, then, perhaps, avant-garde hasn't, as some art critics have claimed, suffered defeat, but right now is at its triumphant position.

References and Notes:

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6. *Ibidem*.
7. *Ibidem*.
8. R. Esposito, *Bios, Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. T. Campbell (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 2008), 49.
9. S. Žižek, "Robespierre or the "Divine Violence" of Terror," available online: <http://www.lacan.com/zizrob.htm> (accessed September 2011).
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12. W. Laquer, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 75, no. 5 (1996): 34.