

# **Training Art, Tracking Discourse**

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## MASTER'S THESIS

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### Abstract

The aim of this essay is to create a methodology for an art project that will help me understand to a greater degree the concept of discipline. This is done through the study of choreographed group fitness classes with music. I consider this to be relevant because these workouts are based on disciplinary and resistance programs, concepts that at the same time have a close connection to the practice of art, and especially during these studies. There is a question repeating along with the text: how to create a disciplinary method for my artistic practice? Then, the different chapters of the text are approximations to this question. My methodological approach comes from a position of maximal involvement, where I narrate my experiences as an active participant, and being an attendant in the workouts acts as a field study for the development of my artistic work. Part of this involvement includes observations, conversations, and an artwork made during spring 2020 that evolves from this question. The theory developed by Michel Foucault on *disciplinary societies* has given me a historical understanding of different mechanisms to apply power individually and collectively.

Then the text operates in two levels: one is the study of situations of dominance through different tools and processes, and the other is the training of an artist to fit into a particular structure (where a coherent discourse is demanded). The analysis happens during and after carrying out the artistic project, both from my written investigations and my practical outcome.

In conclusion, I can say that the concept of the *disciplinary method* has developed during the course of the research, from being the *means* to also exist as *ends*, becoming then artistic material on itself.

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Language: English Key words: artistic practice, digital technologies, discipline, time, training, fitness, discourse

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## INTRODUCTION/ **Self-isolation**

This essay is a symbolic but also a physical journey through Europe in a pandemic reality where socio-political and economic values are changing figures in a moment of permanent uncertainty.

A road trip from Malmö to the Ebro Delta seems the only real alternative to make it happen: have summer holidays in a dream house in north-eastern Spain, whilst the whole globe is still confined, de-confining, or re-confining, and creating strategies for suppressing COVID-19. The physical move of a family appears almost subversive in a recently suspended state of emergency in the Spanish nation. A constant pursuit of vacation time gets continuously interrupted by a reality full of intense family relationships, academic obligations, and new security measures to follow in order to fight the virus.

The starting point looks like the perfect landscape for a sci-fi b film. This changing context operates as a backdrop to my text, where the microscopic entity is a threat capable not only to change the course of events during our studies but also to destabilize an entire planet. The virus, as well as my workouts at the gym, will function as a backbone from which I will articulate and open up different topics that had been important during this journey to address mainly one question: how to create a disciplinary method for my artistic practice?

My natural lack of discipline has caused me situations of self-discomfort when certain protocols require a more pre-meditated attitude and the present education appeared from the start as the perfect training to work on my deficiencies. From my observations along the text, what seems to be clear from the start, is the need for a figure representing this control (be it real or virtual) over another.

What constitutes a legitimate academic essay is the method. So, the search of a methodology – which is again connected with issues of status, authority, and power - has been used here as object of my study. Then, this essay is inevitably going to be self-referential. I am mainly navigating throughout the text from a position where *I am with* (Mit-Sein), a term used by Heidegger to describe how a human being is always with (and by and through) others. Since the art I do is directly affected by my experiences

and my relations to others, the way I approach a text like this is inevitably from the position of a fully engaged participant. So, if I had to sort of affiliate to the academic terminology, my approach would be rather close to a practice-based or practice-lead research.

My desire to create successful systems of optimization (of many things but mostly of time) brings me to observe the gym routines. In the first part of this essay, I begin explaining under which circumstances and preoccupations I develop my latest project *Working body, body of work. Release 1* (2020), very much influenced by all these factors: from the pressure to produce more art<sup>1</sup>, do it better, be more efficient, and ultimately how to develop a successful profile.

In the first chapter, I talk about the context that I am interested in for this purpose and that has influenced the project and its methodology: fitness studios and in particular pre-choreographed training programs, with a special focus on a fitness company called Les Mills International.

It is not a coincidence that I relate this last year with the sports imagery. The entrepreneurial part of this Master consisted of optimizing economic resources when traveling together, exercising my discourse to be able to release it in any situation (being short and convincing), learning to be agile with social media, and make good use of it. I can't say I succeeded with much of these (except with the first one, that after years of financial struggle I cultivated a good sense of low-cost traveling), but the mere vision of the contemporary art agent<sup>2</sup> in motion has given me the strength (and lowered the stress) to interact with *them*, de-mystifying its persona, and getting better results. But, how did it happen? With training.

In the second chapter, I bring up the artist Tehching Hsieh that has influenced me to think of the relation between art and labour, or more precisely what constitutes

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<sup>1</sup> Georgina Adam analyses in *Dark Side of the Boom: The Excesses Of The Art Market In The 21st Century* the current condition of the art market, which has also direct effects on artistic production. When I talk about this pressure I don't seek to compare myself with successful commercial artists, where there is an obvious difference in pressures that is not directly the object of my study.

<sup>2</sup> When I say art agent I refer to a big spectrum of cultural workers, including artists.

art, commitment and discipline. His artistic career is structured by a set of durational performances exploring questions regarding solitude, time, togetherness, shelter, and the notion of art.

From the analysis of the type of mainstream workouts discussed in chapter number one, I begin the project that mimics this methodology, creating a series of paintings during a framed period. In this way, I am acting as a self-tracker, trying to have maximum control over the creative process. Tracing a parallel between productivity and workout time, between the improvement of skills, artistic capacities, and endurance. The project comprises a second branch where I intend to establish a dialogue with a software, using the material I have made for three months, and this brings back to one of the first cases of natural language processing. This is explained in the third chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I bring attention to the concept of presence, be it physically or virtually. What does it mean to an artist, and especially in a moment that encounters have changed into a new paradigm?

The fifth chapter is a close up to the theory on *disciplinary societies* developed by Michel Foucault in 1975 and Gilles Deleuze's *societies of control* from 1992, and how they relate to our present times.

In the sixth and last chapter, I talk about the phenomenon of the Quantified Self, which in a way is closely connected to the previous chapter. Through monitoring the body control and authority is applied to individuals, creating data that will later come back in different forms. I also discuss how self-tracking has influenced our perception of the self and speculate on new temporalities.

Finally, just to give a hint of the conclusion, I can anticipate that my attempts of becoming more disciplined and have a better-organized essay has been a failure. My lack of strategy requires me to be working on big parts of this text literally until the last minute. But on the other hand, through this research, I became more aware in what way I can take what seems to be a problem into a new methodology for working: through speculation, collaboratively and hand-to-hand with technology. This could this mean, in

a long-term engagement with different areas of action, from various collectives, and perhaps creating new ones. Because what I found out, so far, is that discipline responds better collectively.

## CHAPTER ONE/ **Fitness**

From the beginning of this Master of Culture and Arts (aka Entrepreneurship in the Arts<sup>3</sup>) there has been a clear intention in the program towards our professionalization as artists; in other words, the program was born to give us tools to propel us into the business. Among these tools, there has been much reading and understanding of the different roles within the art world. This progressive understanding culminates with this writing but has been preceded by numerous other writings just to warm up for this crucial moment. To be honest, I was ignoring quite much of the importance and benefits for such good practices, and consequently, my journey through this year has been most painful but much rewarding, hence a great work of resistance overall<sup>4</sup>. The bipolar nature of my state of mind during the year and the image of the Blue-Chip artist on the top of the peak has made me constantly think of situations of physical endurance, of self-help-quotes, or business lingo as a clear parallel to (my) artistic practice and development.

During these months of social isolation, one of the most popular activities has been training from home. Like in a hamster wheel, physical exercise was very much-needed to keep people mentally healthy. I had a little different perspective since the gyms in Sweden were never closed, they remained accessible to their customers.

One of the central objects of investigation has been a gym near my home in Malmö. But, why should I bother writing about fitness and workouts in my master's

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<sup>3</sup> Even though we will be awarded a Master of Culture and Arts certificate, the studies are commonly known with the focus on the entrepreneurial, which is a better definition of the given studies emphasizing pro-active attitudes and taking risks.

<sup>4</sup> This affirmation already manifests the comparison with the fitness world that will be discussed during the essay.

essay? Every time I need to give a consistent reason or an argument for this purpose my attraction to gyms and fitness centres seems irrelevant to an intellectual art context. Yet, I will use this text as an opportunity to analyse and try to theorize throughout the following lines why I think this is important.

The project entitled *Working body, body of work. Release 1* (2020) starts to grow in my head when I begin my membership at the Fitness24Seven gym chain two years ago. My way of doing art with a particular subject matter is usually not very rational in the beginning. It starts from a feeling and unfolds slowly taking different forms. Nevertheless, shortly after I started using regularly the app of the gym and sort of getting used to its dynamics I was very attracted to this vast and multi-layered infrastructure that directs and organizes different beings with the help of technology.

Christian Ask, the founder member of Fitness24Seven opened the first gym in 2003 in Malmö, but expanding very fast until today that has reached three different continents.

***Ett kort, alla gym***

*Som medlem hos tränar du obegränsat på över 260 gym i sex länder – över hela världen.<sup>5</sup>*

This appealing sentence pops on the Fitness24Seven website. And this is, for me, just another materialization of our neo-liberal hyperconnected low-cost reality that we are immersed in, in which (until half a year ago) were able to travel unlimitedly all over the world, and using our membership card spontaneously sign up for a Body-Pump® lesson in Bangkok. *This is real magic.*

The other three attractive basic principles of this company are that they are always open (which gives the customer a sense of empowerment and freedom when exists the possibility to access the facilities anytime), that women have the choice to exercise without being watched by men (there is an inner room inside the gym with a selection of training machines only for women), and that they always offer the best

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<sup>5</sup> **One card, all gyms:** As a member, you train unlimited at over 260 gyms in six countries - all over the world. <https://se.fitness24seven.com/var-historia/>



price (the prices range between 199 and 229 kr/month). These four claim phrases are clearly stated on the top of their website under the question: Why Fitness24Seven?

There are many good reasons for becoming a Fitness24Seven member. Another one would be the idea of belonging to a community, a sentiment that is reinforced in the sphere of physical exercise. But we can later have a deeper look into this matter.

Fitness culture had a turning point in the late 1970s with the boom of gyms as a new social phenomenon, and then the popularization of aerobics - or group training with music - after the release of Jane Fonda's legendary workout video in 1982. 'Jane Fonda gave up socialism and started another revolution. Trying to change the world was too complicated. But there was still one thing you could control: your body'.<sup>6</sup> Although it wasn't until the 1990s and early 2000s that became mainstream with the apparition of multiple fitness chains. However, my focus or field of interest is not so much in the democratization of a healthier life-style (which is something that could be discussed), but in the global connectivity product of capitalism, and especially on the homogenization, standardization, appropriation, and branding of products, in this particular case of movements, and how that deeply relates to our (hyper) productivity or the lack of it. Physical exercise in these enclosed boxes becomes an alienating machine. The way I am interested in using the term alienation here is, however, not so much from the Marxist conception but closer to Anna Tsing's approach 'considering the separation of non-humans as well as humans from their livelihood processes'.<sup>7</sup> Tsing points on the ongoing tendency to stand alone and omit entanglements with others as if they don't matter. I find this separation highly visible in moments where physical activity is not about subsisting as a species but as an individual self-isolating routine.

*In the ETM setting music is to the fore since it is the key organizational device around which exercise activities are structured. The sounds, style, tempo and lyrics of each musical track are used to frame the workout and distract participants from feelings of tiredness and/or boredom.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from the BBC documentary by Adam Curtis *HyperNormalisation* (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (p. 374).

<sup>8</sup> Alan Felstead et al. *Moving to the Music: Learning Processes, Training and Productive Systems – The Case of Exercise to Music Instruction* 2006, (p. 3).

Going back to the fitness industry, I am mostly interested here in corporations like Les Mills, to name the tight partner of Fitness24Seven. Les Mills International is a fitness company, one of the largest training institutions that commercialize pre-choreographed training programs worldwide. These ETM<sup>9</sup> branded packs are then sold to other companies like gyms or ‘license to practice’ venues that have specialized personal trainers, or directly to individuals offering virtual classes On-Demand for home training. According to their website, over 20.000 clubs in 100 countries offer Les Mills classes with the help of 140.000 licensed instructors. These instructors have been taken a two-day Initial Module Training followed by another two-day of Advanced Training. Both courses used to be live events (where instructors from different geographical areas met in a physical location) that now have been substituted for its online webinars. Despite these minor differences, Les Mills was already operating mainly digitally for its de-localized condition. Towards an intangible future, they were exploiting the digital sphere before the pandemic, launching its image with very striking campaigns on the web and social media. Also, Fitness24Seven had worked with advanced digital methods for a long time, accustoming users to use an app to do all the bookings and cancellations for the group training, and very little staff hours on the front desk, so the impact of this new distant reality is almost inaudible.

This capitalized mode of exercising exceeds time and geographical borders. My relatives in a little town in Spain can do exactly the same exercises at exactly the same time I do them in Sweden, and we can all *meet* in a different time-frame than the physical room we inhabit. Then, the room or the context we are in is not so relevant any more or the respective instructors, but the inner direction of these branded exercises.

*Training sometimes means nothing more than working according to script and that in these circumstances the specialized knowledge of the script writers may reside upstream in the productive system and away from the point of delivery.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> ETM stands for Exercise to Music.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Felstead et al. *Moving to the Music: Learning Processes, Training and Productive Systems – The Case of Exercise to Music Instruction*. 2006 (p. 3).

But, who is behind the concept of exporting groups of exercises worldwide? The son of Les Mills Snr, the four-time Olympian who represented New Zealand in track and field at the Olympics and Commonwealth Games. Philip Mills founded Les Mills International in 1997, continuing the legacy built by his father who started in 1968 the first gym in Auckland, New Zealand. This *family-run* business employs right now various generations and highlights this quality to give off proximity to its customer.

‘You get to share great music and cutting-edge science that helps people fall in love with fitness’.<sup>11</sup> Les Mills International claim to create the world’s best training programs and one of the key elements is that the workouts are scientifically developed, so every combination of movements is research-based. Scrolling around the website you find numerous research articles that emphasize the investigation behind the workout’s choreographies; and this is basically product of our social obsession with facts and figures. Based on science the company designs the tracks, movements, rhythms, intensities, and length of the exercises, which has been possible with devices that can measure it all. As Michel Foucault already pointed, science can’t be separated from power, so scientific knowledge plays an indispensable role in social structures that apply the standards of normalization on each of us. I believe, in this regard, that a simple 30 min. class isn’t completely free from those standards.

Les Mills choreographies are structured by quarterly releases. The instructors have two weeks to learn each new release that will teach for the next 90 days. After this period is over it comes a new release with a different combination of movements and music tracks. All the instructors in the world will teach the exact same class in each discipline for the same period of time. The foundation for structuring the workouts on a quarterly basis comes from the aim of catching participants of all kinds, with more or less coordination skills. This predictability establishes a routine where the participant learns the choreography after a few passes and knows exactly what to expect. However, ‘after this period this needs to be changed because the body gets used and starts to cheat some movements’ says the Body Balance® instructor Karolina T. that I interview after a Sunday morning class.

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<sup>11</sup> Les Mills website.

I ask Karolina if she tries to (or even can) bring something distinctive from her identity into the class, if the full hour is already created by someone else. When the music, the movements, the sentences are set there seems to be very little space for differences. ‘Either you want it or not your personality will shine through, because some people are more into the strength they will probably teach the Pilates part more energetic. I am not like that, and my voice is always a bit down, so maybe that shows. And before I was teaching I chose the instructors, because even though it was everything the same I did like some instructors better, they communicated in a way that connected with me.’ I can agree with this affirmation, but this leaves very little room to cultivate one’s own personality or reinforce it as a positive value, rather the opposite, where exists a pressure to keep the company’s identity invariable.

Today, this enterprise keeps forming new instructors at a dizzying rate, expanding the community every day, and as said before, now reinforcing the digital. The bombardment on social media under the hashtag #worldunited is addressing this idea of togetherness, so necessary on the other hand. But how? From the safety of our homes or gyms, working together to reach our goals, to make it possible. In times of professional uncertainty and social destabilization physical exercise can be a good alternative. This transformational symbology acts almost like a spiritual doctrine. ‘Helping people to fall in love with fitness is one of the most powerful things I can do to help the planet.’<sup>12</sup> The arrangement with a leading voice on stage and the audience facing the leader invokes both to a ritualistic setting (church) or an entertainment one (cinema, theatre, TV), but here ‘the audience is actively involved in what is being produced for consumption’<sup>13</sup>. ‘The moving body is reflexively monitored, in relation to the senses that engage with the virtual cultural material made available for consumption’.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, what it comes to my mind is that perhaps fitness companies are today replacing some religious practices. Because there is an intrinsic need in humans to believe in things, we create rituals to gather together. Humans have been defined as an ultra-social species meaning that we need to be with others from our

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<sup>12</sup> Diana Mills <https://www.lesmills.com/fit-planet/our-tribe/diana-mills/>

<sup>13</sup> J. Sayers and T. Bradbury, ‘*Let the music take your mind*’: *aesthetic labour and “working out” to music* 2004 (pp.11-14).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

species to survive. This essential need seems to be confronted with technological developments, that functions at the same time connecting and distancing people.

I would dare to affirm that the standardization of movements not only shapes our bodies to look all the same but ultimately it shapes our identity as a group to also think the same. And this implicit aggressiveness fuels the craving for productivity, in a context where doing nothing is not so sexy.

## CHAPTER TWO/ **The case of Tehching Hsieh**

On 29 September 1978 Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh decided to confine himself for a year, until 30 September 1979 in a wooden cage built inside of his studio in New York. The cage was 3.5 x 2.7 x 2.4 m. equipped only with a bed, lights, a pail and a washbasin. He had an assistant that provided food daily and removed his waste, but during that year that he voluntarily recruited himself he abstained from talking or any form of entertainment (reading, writing, or listen to the radio and TV). The performance was announced, and he had opened some days to the public, but at the time Hsieh was still an illegal immigrant and wasn't really part of the art community, so it did not have a major impact then. This piece is called One Year Performance 1978-1979 (Cage Piece) and it is only the first out of six of his best-known durational performances (1978 – 2000), five of them of one-year duration.

The second he made 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece) consisted of punching a time clock every hour on the hour, and take a photo of himself every time he punched the time clock as documentation. This way, he was not able to have a proper sleep or do much else during that particular period.

These first two pieces are incredibly well related to our days. One is about isolation and solitude, the other about quantifying time - time in the way we understand it in the Western democratic market societies: the productive time -; but it is also, as Hito Steyerl calls it, the junktime. This kind of time that is interrupted, disperse,

discontinuous, that responds to the economy of presence.<sup>15</sup> *'Presence also means permanent availability without any promise of compensation. In the age of the reproducibility of almost everything physical, human presence is one of the few things that cannot be multiplied indefinitely, an asset with some inbuilt scarcity'*<sup>16</sup>

All of Hsieh's performances obey a strong determination and deep radicality in content and method. What he did back in 1978 for a year is similar to what big areas of the population have been forced to do on a global scale during some weeks in 2020, with some major differences, that is obvious. But, thinking in the way we are so busy being entertained and the speed we live in, this striking piece acquires even bigger relevance today. Both exercises reveal that we need others from our species, that even isolation encompasses implicit associations with others, interdependences, and that being in solitude can be seen as an arduous achievement. Disciplinary punishment, for instance, uses the *corrective* method of solitary confinement.<sup>17</sup>

In the third one-year performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece) he spent one year outside, having prohibited being indoors or have a shelter of any kind. He was carrying a backpack and sleeping bag and moving around Lower Manhattan. This piece could be the opposite of the Cage piece but with similar difficulties. 'The self can perish from exposure, as well as from confinement'<sup>18</sup>. He again documented the process, tracking his movements in a map: where he ate, slept, defecated, or sometimes got a wash. This self-tracking that he anticipated wouldn't look so much different today with an iPhone in the pocket that can follow our actions and perhaps later share it on social media. Actually, both need an audience to witness in some way what has been done, otherwise, it never existed.

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<sup>15</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'The Terror of Total Dasein', *Duty Free Art*. 2017 (pp. 43 - 47).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* that disciplinary punishment has borrowed forms from the judicial model, like fines, flogging, or solitary confinement. (p. 179).

<sup>18</sup> Steven Shaviro, "Performing Life: The work of Tehching Hsieh" Archived from the original <https://web.archive.org/web/20080603025439/http://www.one-year-performance.com/intro.html>

The fourth piece called Art / Life: One Year Performance 1983-1984 (Rope Piece) was a collaboration with the performance artist Linda Montano. They spent one year tied to each other by a 2.4 m. rope. They had to be constantly together but were not allowed to touch each other until the performance was complete.

The last One Year Performance 1985–1986 (No Art Piece) consisted of not reading, doing, participating, talking or viewing any art during that year. Compared with the previous ones, this performance could be seen as the easiest to achieve, because it doesn't risk mental or physical health. It can even reflect a (perhaps) recurrent thought among artists to stop doing art in particular periods. But, at the same time, this is the most difficult to control as creative thinking isn't something possible to limit or stop (unlike following specific physical restrictions). This piece is particularly important to call into question all the previous ones: what is art and what is not?

All the performances are carefully documented during the processes, as actions take most place in solitude, and the proof of his actions are the photos, recordings, or the witness of lawyers who notarized the procedure. Although, it is only through a process of sharing and validation with the audience that it becomes art, at this moment of communication and exchange. So, the audience plays an indispensable role in his actions where the private domain becomes the object of art. Without documentation, there are no remains and without an audience to witness the remains there is no legitimation.

Tehching Hsieh has been one of those artists who followed me during the past few years. He understood art as a discipline in one of the most radical, engaged, and dedicated attitudes I have ever seen; and looking at his work I can only see this fortitude and conviction that holds towards art and touches upon my desire to bet it all and have no doubts about it (before or during the process).

I think, however, that we tend to misinterpret concepts and his One Year Performances have been described too often with the focus on the uncomfortably, superficially negative aspects, because we are part of this commodified society, but to me, his practice evokes a devotion that gets closer to the mystic. 'This kind of work is

not about suffering, it is about existence. It is about a technique; my concept is to show this technique.’<sup>19</sup>

The method he proposes contains, however, something very recomforting, which are the routines (even if they are tough ones and contain very unpredictable elements). But, knowing what to expect gives certain security that art most times does not provide. And this is precisely one point of coincidence with the gym routines and exported lessons, now applied to the general well-being of society. When we talked about finding conformity that meant on the one hand losing some excitement about the upcoming but on the other being safe with what we already know. Pushing them to an extreme, Hsieh has turned domestic routines into the artistic discourse in his practice.



Tehching Hsieh. One Year Performance. 1978–79.

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<sup>19</sup> Delia Bajo; Brainard Carey *'In conversation: Tehching Hsieh'*. The Brooklyn Rail. Critical Perspective on Art, Politics, and Culture. (August–September 2003). <https://brooklynrail.org>



## CHAPTER THREE/ **The Project: From representing reality to generating discourse**

Now that we have framed the context I was influenced by, or at least that had an impact on my way of seeing self-discipline in a recreational space, I can assert that my first questions circled around the dichotomy's work/leisure, and labour/hobby, becoming rather confused by this holy set-up. Whereas my gym behaves like my workplace and my studio acts like this undefined site, reinforcing the romantic cliché of the utterly confused and unstructured artist.<sup>20</sup> Yet, this site displacement is precisely the most interesting part, where some processes can be extracted from one place and apply it into another and vice-versa.

Then, how does self-disciplinary workouts or training routines can have an impact on my artistic processes - not understood just as being more prolific? What if I reproduce some of the company's routines and apply it to my artistic practice? Can this process generate discourse? What will happen if I mirror these processes? What happened was that I started a period where the constant production of paintings gave me a similar result than when I do the workouts: I know what to expect and I can only *get better*.

*Working body, body of work. Release 1* (2020) is a project that consists of two separate phases: the first one is the execution of 90 paintings (21 x 29,7 cm. oil on mdf) motivated by all we have spoken above, and the second is the 3D model of the painted object where I explore the human-machine dialectics.

The size of the paintings corresponds to an A4, the most commonly available paper size worldwide, part of the ISO 216. Paper's standardization concept was developed in Germany in 1921 but introduced as a national standard by many other countries along the twentieth century. It was developed to make document reproductions more efficient and cheaper.

The framework of these series of paintings is based on a set of rules that come from my days at Fitness24Seven: during a period of three months, one painting should be made every day, no matter the external circumstances. So, from 20/03/2020 to

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<sup>20</sup> I'm only being a little bit sarcastic here since one of the key elements for being a successful artist is to keep a business vision to manage your talent.

17/06/2020 I painted every day the same object, starting the series at exactly the same moment that we (the Master of Culture and Arts' students) were supposed to begin our week in Dubai. This project was actually previously postponed for not being able to accomplish my obligations and engage in the way these systematic paintings required. In this case, COVID-19 'favoured' my agenda allowing me to stay in the same place until further notice. The time-frame of this project come from the three-month period that Les Mills uses to internalize a routine. After this period is over a new release will be launched and a new set of movements will take place.

As Karolina was saying, the choreography must change after this time, otherwise the body will start to cheat, finding some shortcuts. One of the aspects of the project was to challenge my practice with this idea, and observe how the body gets used to paint a certain object as time passes. In the same way, we could question if this also happens for example to a painter or a sculptor who controls very well a particular technique, and it consists of variations of the same from a quite comfortable place; would that be cheating? In the same way, could we apply this theory to the artistic discourse, if we internalize some topics that seem to define us, could these be some sorts of shortcuts to get there faster and more efficiently?

The object I represent has been always the same: a bronze sculpture that has never intended to be an art object, or that it wasn't conceived for artistic purposes, made from an excess of bronze (being a very important material that reached its peak during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), and not by my own hands, but by the hands of another artist. All these elements allowed me to talk about material fetishism, the role of representation and abstraction, hierarchy of genre, artistic disciplines, value, authorship, appropriation, and ready-made.

This shapeless object that echoes the geological realm has rotated very slowly every day in order to have captured all its angles, resulting in a temporal sequence. The variations on every day's result are the consequence of the invested time and/or the trained skills during this period. The apparent immutability of bronze will experience some changes over time, not from the object itself but from my perception and subsequent interpretation of it.

Nevertheless, more important than the finalized product is the methodology that becomes key in this process; because the final results are just the physical traces of an exercise.



*Working body, body of work. Release 1 (2020)*  
Installation view



Painting detail

The second part of the project is still to be formalized but consists of a photogrammetric 3D model that is produced with the information I provide to the computer, in this case, the 90 paintings. ‘Photogrammetry is the science of making measurements from photographs. The input to photogrammetry is photographs, and the output is typically a map, a drawing, a measurement, or a 3D model of some real-world object or scene.’<sup>21</sup> Later on, a software will do the 3D reconstruction from multiple images. This normally happens processing the photos from a real object taken from various perspectives. My proposal is to give photographs to the software from the painted object, which is an already altered representation of *reality*, paintings that mirror my own subjectivity<sup>22</sup> that will later have another reading. So human and machine will meet in a space full of interpretation, utterance, and most probably misunderstanding. There is a risk that the software won’t recognize my object, or that it just needs more information. In this case, the series will continue until we find a place in common.

This synthetic dialogue brings me to the case of ELIZA, an early natural language processing computer program<sup>23</sup> created from 1964 to 1966 by Joseph Weizenbaum at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. For this experiment, Weizenbaum built a Rogerian psychotherapist<sup>24</sup> which came as a parody of the psychotherapist technique. The program processed the human responses according to pre-designed scripts. ‘The Rogerian psychotherapist is relatively easy to imitate because much of his technique consists of drawing his patient out by reflecting the patient’s statements back to him’.<sup>25</sup> The discovery happened quite accidentally, when Weizenbaum asked his secretary to try a conversation with ELIZA. After some exchanges with the computer, at some point, the secretary asked the scientist to leave the room. Weizenbaum couldn’t believe that this dialogue proved to be as intimate as with a human, reaching high levels of confidence.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.photogrammetry.com>

<sup>22</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann argues in *How to do things with Art* how the notion of the individual is central to the exhibition in the way it began 200 years ago in the Western democratic market societies.

<sup>23</sup> Natural language processing (NLP) is a category of artificial intelligence that support computers to read and understand human language.

<sup>24</sup> Person-centred therapy developed by Carl Rogers.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason. From judgement to calculation*. 1976 (p. 3)

ELIZA seems only one of Siri's ancestors, the virtual assistant from Apple Inc. with whom we can have a relative fluid conversation today. But, for those who want to go back to the first experiments of computer-human interface and challenge the machine it is actually still possible to have a real-time interaction with ELIZA with an online demo<sup>26</sup>, and perhaps find too many similarities with our human interplay. What sometimes can be a quite non-sense situation can easily lead into a very philosophical terrain.

**Talk to Eliza**

\* I still can't find my question  
> Can you elaborate on that?  
\* i have too many questions and power is pushing me to choose a cristal clear one, but I can't  
> Have you tried?  
\* yes  
> I understand.  
\* i have been trying for a damn year  
> What does that suggest to you?  
\* that perhaps I am stupid  
> Do you believe it is normal to be stupid?

Input:

**Talk to Eliza**

\* enjoy life  
> Tell me more...  
\* feel eager to meet up with friends, feel excited at work...  
> What does that suggest to you?  
\* that I need to do something to feel that way  
> Can you elaborate on that?  
\* maybe I should go to a real therapist  
> Why the uncertain tone?  
\* do you think I should go?  
> You're not really talking about me, are you?

Input:

Conversation between ELIZA and Ariadna. October 2020

<sup>26</sup> <http://psych.fullerton.edu/mbirnbaum/psych101/Eliza.htm>

## CHAPTER FOUR/ A claim for presence

As previously mentioned, from May 2020 Les Mills two-day training modules have been substituted for its online webinars. On the website, a few instructors speak of the benefits of this format affirming for instance that time is more efficiently used, it is much cheaper, and just easier during online training.

This digital format has occupied most educational programs during the past six months, including our own. Our trip to Dubai in March 2020 was also substituted by a week-long webinar preceded by dozens of hours of recorded interviews and a virtual visit to Art Basel Hong Kong, followed by a two-week workshop in the substitution of the Jakobstad block. Right from the beginning the art community (among many others) reacted and offered all kinds of alternatives to the physical events. There has been an explosion of online exhibitions, talks, presentations, symposiums, performances, screenings of all kinds, digital film programs, or uploaded private collections. It seems to me that we have all the necessary tools to make it possible, to open up to the world and keep us active within the culture sector. And now I wonder, are we going back to where we were before all this? In a moment of ecological emergency, is it really possible? A big portion of the studies was aiming to show us the importance of visiting these massive events and taught us how relatively accessible it was. As artists, we have the obligation of being updated, and our current globalized hyperconnected reality permitted to do so. But, the collapse in the middle of a year dedicated to these matters has made me wonder a lot if any of this was totally right<sup>27</sup> (enjoying the opportunities of movement allowed by capitalism) and which is our social responsibility. All this, inevitably makes me think again of Hito Steyerl when affirms that ‘the contemporary economy of art relies more on presence than on more traditional ideas of labour power tied to the production of objects. Presence as in physical presence, as in attendance or being-there in person. The idea of presence invokes the promise of unmediated communication, the glow of uninhibited existence, a seemingly unalienated experience and authentic encounter between humans. Presence stands for allegedly real discussion, exchange, communication, the happening, the event, liveness, the real thing - you get

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<sup>27</sup> I am talking in general about these dynamics as a society, not specifically to the studies.

the idea.<sup>28</sup> What Steyerl is critically addressing is the disproportionate relevance of the figure of the artist in comparison to the actual work of art. How the relational aspects play a major role in the art world. For sure, now these claims acquire more importance than ever or at least make us wonder how this will be further handled. It is unquestionable that in the life of an artist/art agent there is an enormous part of work that consists of live meetings, opportunities that just happen fruit of (sometimes random) encounters, where relationships are cultivated between people, without them being programmed, limited, assured, and expected. Not to mention art that takes the form of events, experiences, or more relational practices, where the physical presence of an audience is (or has been until now) completely necessary. The essay *A Terror of Total Dasein: Economies of Presence in the Art Field* that was first published at the e-flux journal around 2015 argues on the essentiality of being physically there, in one same place, not from our respective private apartments, not behind the screens. Of course, at that moment it was not necessary to think of sustainable alternatives, but now we do. So, what would these economies of presence mean right now, in the middle of a pandemic? The curator Chus Martínez was pointing in a recent conference<sup>29</sup> that it has now become the terror of presence (again a terror), and these gatherings acquire performative magnificence. This physical presence also means accepting the vulnerability of our bodies, of our immune system, and understanding *the other* not like a thread or enemy that can harm us. These economies of presence in the art world that Steyerl was firmly addressing now play a totally different role.

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<sup>28</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'The Terror of Total Dasein' *Duty Free Art*. 2017 (pp. 41 - 42).

<sup>29</sup> Symposium *Womxn in Motion*, institute Kunst HGK FHNW. Online streaming October 7-8, 2020.

## CHAPTER FIVE/ **Good Manners**

*The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. The body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful.*<sup>30</sup>

There is an interesting discussion on state power initiated by Michel Foucault in 1975 that extensively argues what the *disciplinary societies* are (situated in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in comparison to the previous *societies of sovereignty*) and followed by what Gilles Deleuze calls the *societies of control* in a text written in 1992, which anticipated the moment we are in. According to Foucault, power in the *disciplinary societies* is employed by the use of three instruments: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination. The first one refers to the idea of autoregulation under the threat of being watched<sup>31</sup>. This way of applying power is more current than ever with the use of technological devices (and our conscious or unconscious interactions with them). Sending and receiving data uninterruptedly we provide all the information that will come back in forms of dominance or business profit.<sup>32</sup>

The second instrument is very interesting because (unlike the repressive power that applies violence and threat), the normalizing power functions at a subtler level, turning us into beings that wish to do what societies want us to do, constructing our view of the world and of ourselves, shaping our decisions, beliefs and desires. We are all subjected to a normalizing power because it comes from an institutional level, more difficult to recognize (unlike, again, in the *societies of sovereignty* that came from a very concrete direction: the king).

The third and last instrument used in the *disciplinary societies* is examination, which fuses the two previous ones. This is the instrument that evaluates the individual according to the common standards, classify it, and punish if needed. As our behaviour

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<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1977 (p. 136).

<sup>31</sup> In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault referred to the *Panopticon* as an example of psychological authority. Modern state has moved away from enforcing their authority physically to enforce it psychologically.

<sup>32</sup> Shoshana Zuboff discusses in the book *Surveillance Capitalism* the development of digital companies and how they act as a new form of capitalist accumulation.



is sampled and tracked, will be judged and evaluated, and subsequently classified as normal or abnormal.

One of the differences between the two moments is that in the *disciplinary societies* the individual always pass from one place of enclosure into another, all with its implicit rules: from family to school to factory to hospital (perhaps to prison...), one after the other, whereas a characteristic of the *societies of control* described by Deleuze is that one is never finished with anything, they all coexist at the same time, the edges have blurred. Because in the *disciplinary societies* these institutions were spatial, at least you knew when you left them (and moved into to the next one), but in the *societies of control* even when you are at home you can be constantly doing work, and sometimes when you are at work you are distracted by social media. Nothing is as rigid any more. Which brings me back to the utterly confused artist who doesn't know if she is working, labouring, resting or working out (or probably all at the same time), and to Steyerl's economies of presence and its risks.

*There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.*<sup>33</sup>

Again, it is only because of this hyper-connectivity and hyper-presence that I see that art has a new entry door.

*One poetic strategy to deal with the surplus of meaning catalysed by the digital revolution is hacking. Unlike critical and defensive strategies, cracking codes, breaking signs out of their automatic naturalness, and inventing new language games are all evidence of a positive, militant, and optimistic approach.*<sup>34</sup>

Then, these new weapons seem to be already here, it is just a matter of learning how to use them.

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<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control*. *October*, Vol. 59. 1992 (p. 4).

<sup>34</sup> Armen Avanesian, *Miamification*. 2017 (p. 102).

## CHAPTER SIX/ **The Quantified Self. A Methodology for Artistic Production**

There is a bizarre similarity between Les Mills aesthetics and concept and the second episode of British science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror*. In ‘Fifteen Million Merits’, the society must cycle non-stop to be able to earn a currency called *merits*<sup>35</sup>. It is not explained for what purpose is needed all this energy, but the multitude seems to be trapped pumping the world, altogether. The parallelism with a capitalist mode of production is absolutely present in both settings. This society listens to music, or watch videos to amuse themselves, to abstract their body from the actual activity, but the quality of the content they get is equivalent to their merits, to how much they have worked (out) and how efficient they have been. There is again a striking resemblance with The Trip™, a ‘fully immersive workout experience that combines a 40-minute multi-peak cycling workout with a journey through digitally-created worlds.’<sup>36</sup> What becomes very relevant to me is to think about all the wasted energy surplus that so many bodies generate collectively. Where is it all going?

When I think about all those bodies cycling 24/7 I also think of the devices that measure them, creating amounts of data being released ad infinitum.

The cycling bodies from ‘Fifteen Million Merits’ seem to mirror the massive amount of data we are generating on a daily basis. The Quantified Self is a movement which consists of the use of self-quantification systems (SQS) for tracking mostly health-related matters, whose final purpose is a better self-knowledge which translates into a better quality of life.

*Self-tracking constructs intimate and vital events into units of measurement – writing the body into legibility.*<sup>37</sup>

The founders of the Quantified Self Institute in 2007 Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly have created a community engaging self-trackers, tool leaders, and health leaders

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<sup>35</sup> Merit stands for excellence and worth which are common adjectives reflect of a competitive society. In this fictional society labour is used as a facilitator and a tool that grants this merit.

<sup>36</sup> Les Mills Website.

<sup>37</sup> James Dyer, *Quantified Bodies*. Digital Culture and Society, Vol. 2, Issue 1. 2016 (pp.161-163)

to collaborate at various levels, and in this way support what they call everyday science.<sup>38</sup> I wonder how all this information we get from ourselves really give us better knowledge of *who* we are. I guess, getting used to seeing the world only through the lens of science can have the risk of reducing every action into data. Jamie Sherman brilliantly argues in her article *How Theory Matters: Benjamin, Foucault, and Quantified Self* how self-quantification abstracts the real experience, creating data numbers and facts from a situation and detaching it from the real context, from the particularities of that specific moment. 'Self-quantification does for experience what photography and mass distribution channels do for art'.<sup>39</sup> What would have done Tehching Hsieh if he had some tracking devices that permitted the audience to see his actions 24/7? To be honest, I don't think his work could have existed as it is, since the most interesting part of it begins when you start to imagine possible situations that may or may not have happened.

*'Quantified self apps and devices that track our steps, our resting heart rates, our bites, and our vaginal fitness are merely the next logical step along the road that began with Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, and part of the disciplinary regime in which physical health and fitness are closely linked to what it means to be both a good person and a good member of the community.'*<sup>40</sup>

*Via self-tracking, vital variables and intimate relations are read and new ones written, the body is written in acknowledgement of its past, present and future form - this is the quantified body*<sup>41</sup>

Then, looking at these devices that monitor and translate us into data, from the most conscious forms to the most inherent ones, what really triggers me is to think of what kind of new temporality we are in. Which is our notion of time today? Which is

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<sup>38</sup> <https://quantifiedself.com>

<sup>39</sup> Jamie Sherman, *How Theory Matters: Benjamin, Foucault, and Quantified Self - Oh My!* (January 28, 2015) <https://www.epicpeople.org/how-theory-matters/>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> James Dyer, *Quantified Bodies*. Digital Culture and Society, Vol. 2, Issue 1. 2016 (pp.161-163)

the role of art within this new temporality? There seems to be a strange temporal shift nowadays where past, present, and future forms are no longer what we know. A new conception of time is at the centre of Armen Avanesian's practice, which claims that 'there is no longer a chronological time, that we live in a time complex society where the future happens before the present. A present that comes from the future.'<sup>42</sup> From what he argues there seems to be constant anticipation to things that may happen. He talks for example of the *preemptive personality* which could be the recommended readings from Amazon based on our previous purchases. At some point, our devices know us better than ourselves. And this brings me back to when we talked about collecting data for providing better self-knowledge. What seems to happen for me is that the understanding of ourselves is subjected to the interpretation of the machine, and this can at the same time be very subjective.

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<sup>42</sup> Armen Avanesian *Postcontemporary Angst and Fear*, conference for the Sonic Acts Festival (2017)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3rRaam4JSg>

## CONCLUSION/ **Towards disciplinary methods as *ends***

The starting point of this essay comes from the urgency of finding a disciplinary method as a *means* (in this particular case to help me fit the text into an academic format). In this regard, my approach may not have been correct, looking at disciplinary examples but elaborating the text in the same organic way that I normally use, lacking the strategy. On the contrary, while taking all these actions I have realized that this disciplinary process can also exist as *ends* (not only as *means*), where the discipline itself becomes artistic material. This way of using it as *ends* would comprise some topics that have been discussed before, like the use of technological devices and some forms of collaborations. Something that was clear from this exercise, is that an external figure exerting power is really important. According to this, I start to fantasize about other strategies in the long-term, as it could be creating a superior entity, in form of collaborations and tracing alliances.

Consequently, all this means engaging in long-term research where these problems can turn into something positive, into fertile material. In my early projects, I believed that art operates in a territory where is not imperative to articulate a clear discourse, that art is capable of speaking at a level that language can't reach. A part of me still likes to believe that, but I am also aware that we live in a pragmatic society, and this means finding a common language where we can all communicate and understand each other. I really don't want to sound pretentious or give the impression that art is above everything else, but I think that one of the particularities of the arts (and here I refer to the whole spectrum of the arts from visual, literary, performing or multidisciplinary arts) is that acts on the sensible realm, and this can be something hard to predict or describe.

A better understanding of the art structure has given me the possibility to recognize certain roles and hierarchies, and this sort of empowerment can be a very useful instrument when I come to think of *poetic strategies*. These strategies must commit to other players and must have a lot of room outside the institutional realm, approaching the population, spreading like a microscopic entity.

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