

POISONING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

CONTEMPORARY FASHION AND JEWELRY ACTIVISM AGAINST SURVEILLANCE

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the proliferation of electronic devices, wearables, and information technology has enabled the collection and extraction of vast amounts of personal and behavioural data, penetrating our physical nature until biological. We are witnessing the gradual transformation of data mining into life mining. The big data collected feeds machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence systems, which effectively implement real-time surveillance of our lives, mainly for commercial purposes. Starting from theoretical reflections on the human and non-human component inside AI, the essay identifies some projects by fashion and jewellery designers that subvert the ubiquitous surveillance system, acting concretely in specific processual and technological dynamics. By supporting a disruptive approach, the essay seeks to chart new spaces of design thinking that disobey or begin to question the prevailing logic involved in AI on our bodies.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; Fashion activism; Contemporary Jewellery; Bodily Datification; Disruptive Design*

Artificial intelligence between humans and non-humans

In technical terms, Artificial Intelligence is the result of a branch of computer science that, since the 1970s, has developed algorithms capable of improving computational computation within hardware and software systems. Their evolution, by introducing machine learning - which consists of artificial learning through neural networks and databases - has led to the construction of functional systems increasingly similar to human intelligence, equipped with visual perception, understanding of space-time factors, and decision-making capacity. Influenced by the transdisciplinary nature that pervades design and the emergence of a range

of open software that has bypassed the ability to program, AI has also invaded the realms of design and fashion over the past decade. Among the most impactful industries in the world, fashion is also involved in the potential strategic and economic exploitation of AI. The opportunities for use propagate along the entire chain of design, production, distribution, and communication processes, ranging from the analysis of big data and giga maps to social computing, from the visual processing of images and videos to writing, from the construction of blockchain and NFT to the design of avatars and social influencers. The technological acceleration of AI we are witnessing is no accident but an integral part of the evolving nature of the human species. Bound by the

capitalist logic of maximum output in the shortest possible time, it pushes humans and machines towards more performative and immediate outputs, thinning the boundary between natural and artificial and, consequently, between human and non-human (Jacque et al., 2019).

Contrary to what we thought, instead of freedom given back in terms of time, resources, and opportunities, technology is also handing back a set of complex criticalities to manage. In this sense, the problem linked to advanced technologies, such as AI, concerns the observation of how contemporary individuals risk turning into passive subjects traversed by gigantic quantities of data that are difficult to understand and govern.

However, the terminological question can come to our aid and reveal new awareness due to its ability to bring the arguments back to the root: artificial intelligence is not correctly artificial but rather the result of a complex set of factual data produced by humans. Consequently, we can downgrade its dominant potential since it should be understood

primarily as a product of human creativity. (Dreyfuss, 1992).

From an extractivist perspective, relocating humans from a passive and defensive position to an active and co-creative one is essential. According to some studies, through a co-evolutionary relationship, we generate data at the same rate as they shape and modify our lives, becoming, at the same time, producers and consumers. (Iaconesi & Persico, 2021).

This alignment between technology and humanity leads to an ever-closer relationship between the artificial and the organic, the synthetic and the living, the human and the non-human. However, unlike living organisms, artificial intelligence often appears weightless on the horizon, penetrating the surface of things with difficulty. Far from organic bodies' granular, porous materiality, artificial intelligence's results are often reflective, lucid, and alien. The ever-changing and dazzling aesthetics and images that return to us in a continuous whirlwind of prompts seem like exoskeletons,

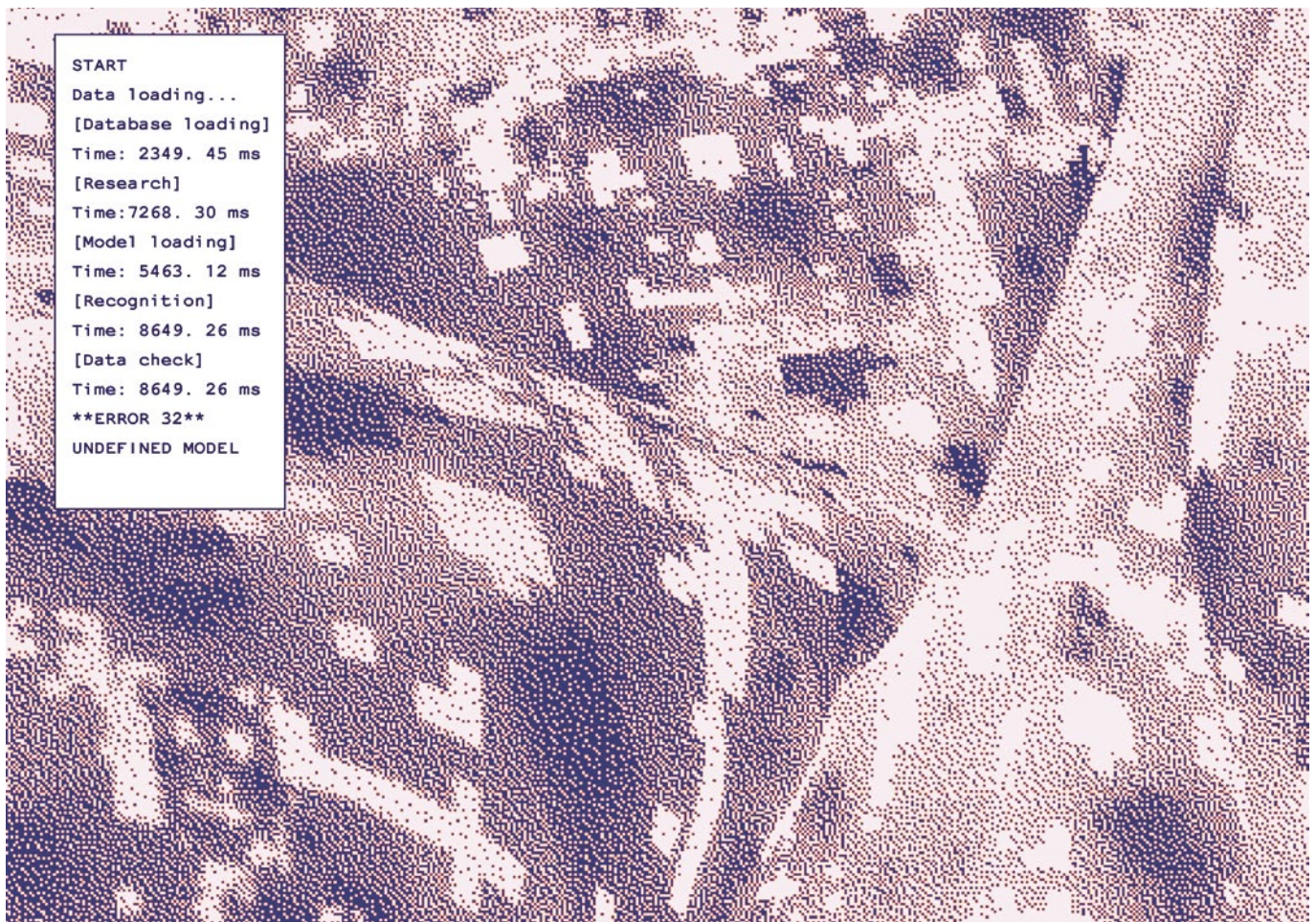


Fig. 1

beautiful empty shells devoid of consistent meaning. They emerge from the unknown, from remote places, from an unknown elsewhere. The indecipherable in the field of techno-informatics is depicted perfectly by AI. The crypticity hidden behind the computing capabilities of artificial intelligence has been the subject of contemporary art, film, and literature on several occasions and still represents an evolutive phenomenon that is difficult to interpret. Shrouded in an aura of mystery, AIs arouse curiosity and wonder and represent a valuable expedient for a visual imagination able to constantly reinvent new combinations contaminated by a weird taste. The problematic issues related to AI, both in terms of the free will of the human will and the protection of its privacy and space of existence, are inherent in the complex interaction between the human factor and the no-human one [fig. 01]. An interaction where the human being is more often a passive agent than an active one.

In the book *'New Dark Age'*, the British critic James Bridle states, *'We consider automated information more reliable than our own experiences (...) When confronted with complex problems, particularly under time pressure, people use the least amount of cognitive energy, preferring solutions as easy to follow as they are to justify.'* (Bridle, p.34).

This consideration is expressed in the complete confidence in machines, a faith that reinforces the prejudice that automated shortcuts are a priori more reliable than non-automated ones. In a way, AI rides on the biological human tendency to unquestioningly entrust a decision to a computerised system to optimise cognitive effort and time. Hence, there is the fear that AI-related technological advancement does not foster the evolution of deep critical thinking but is the beginning of a new way of co-creating more on the surface with the no-human.

Starting from these human and non-human relations, and also to avoid a loss of consciousness, the contribution intends to explore the theme of AI by applying it to the human body by identifying a series of critical design projects.

In particular, the intention is to focus on the individual's freedom through their physical body, related to contemporary fashion and jewellery.

If it is true, as Jean Luc Nancy states, that *"this body is not mine, but this body is me"* (Nancy, 1995, p.102), it is also true that the human body becomes

synonymous with local existence, occupation of space, personal thought, and the individual's inalienable right to do with it what they want. Our body indicates the space from which we can separate, multiply, expand, or, on the contrary, introject ourselves, protect ourselves, and live from within. Awareness of the ownership of our body as a *'datum'* can give us back, in this sense, the freedom to express ourselves, act, and become a *'numerical input'* or not of artificial intelligence. Insofar as bodies can open up and trespass, mingling with artificial intelligence and thus with non-human agencies, they become discursive phenomena, as continuous reconfigurations of the world, through which we can declare boundaries, properties, and meanings since boundaries never stand still.

Bodily Datification

The widespread deployment of personal electronic devices and information technologies (sensors, actuators, IoT, IoE), along with the pervasiveness of wireless communication technologies, enable the extraction of enormous amounts of data. These data describing the physical world's processes, phenomena, and behaviours populate and build an invisible cybernetic layer. In the virtual dimension, the collected information is accumulated to form massive databases and big *Data*, which feed the learning systems of Artificial Intelligence. Machine Learning algorithms process the data by returning representations of the corresponding physical entities and phenomena.

In addition, the miniaturisation of devices and increased computational capabilities have enabled collecting and monitoring increasingly accurate biometric data. Using bioinformatics technologies quantifies the self beyond epidermal superficiality and relates to our bodies' biological and organic nature (Mancuso, 2023). Indeed, sensors embedded in wearables are constantly connected to the network, enabling the process of dataification, that is, the transfer of more and more aspects of our lives in the form of data (Pedersen & Iliadis, 2020). These relate to the biological body and its computational image, composed of objective parameters and real-time data streams [fig.02]. The scenario described outlines a new Internet paradigm, surpassing the Internet of Things and Internet of Everything models, referred to as the *Internet of People* or IoP (Conti et al., 2017).

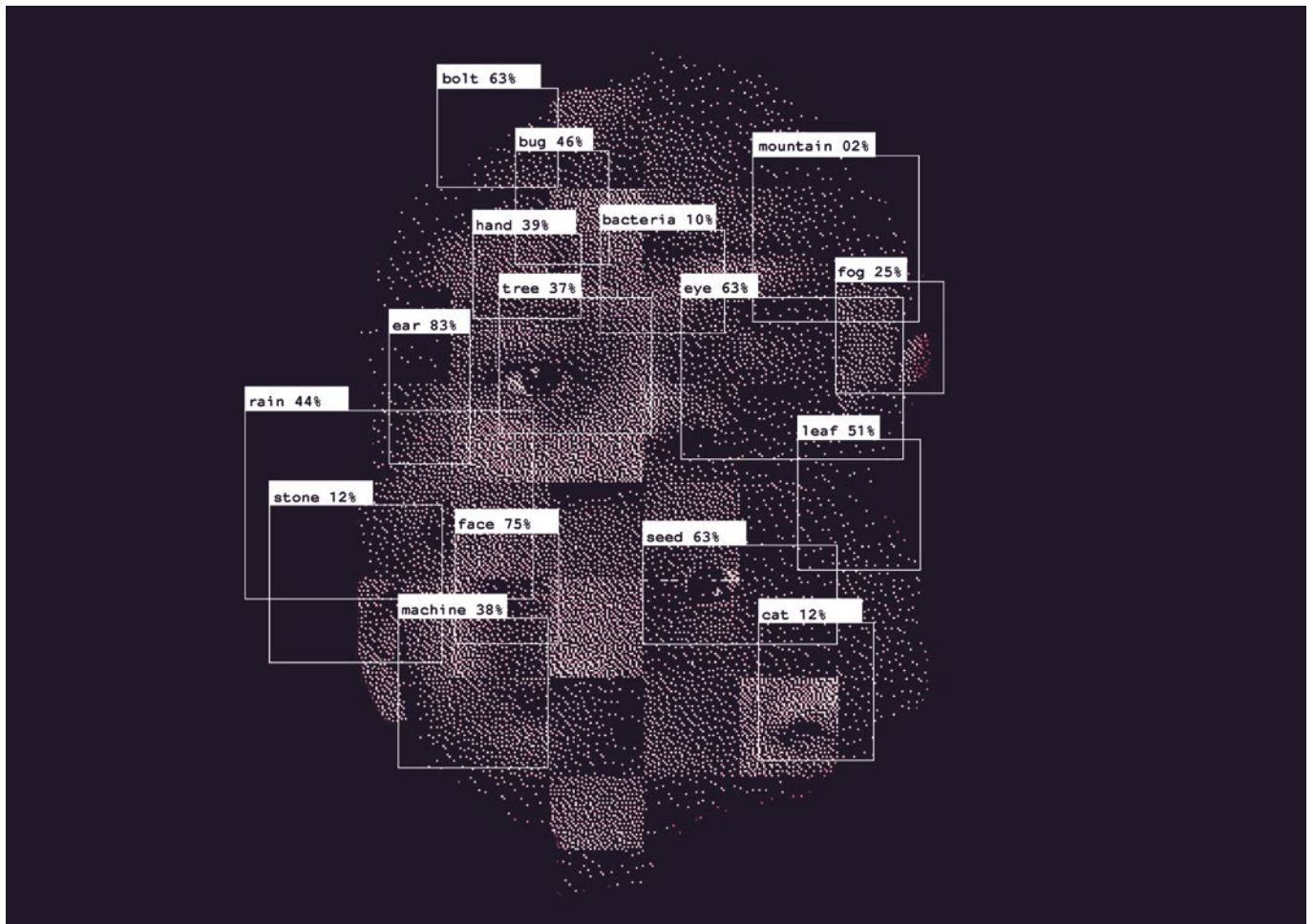


Fig. 2

Eye displays, virtual iris, hand recognition, tracking systems using satellite technologies, detection of heart rate, breath, body heat, and sleep monitoring are the technologies deployed today in both mobile phones and a range of wearables, wearable electronic devices, on the market. The body is no longer bounded by skin, a membrane separating the outside from the inside, but is enveloped by an intangible surface of information, communication and data collection.

Biofeedback systems and biosensors can monitor body processes and chemicals: they investigate physiological and biochemical processes by detecting the most common substances emitted by the body, such as enzymes, amino acids, and carbon dioxide; they assess the activity of the microbiome, the bacterial flora that influences our psycho-somatic state; and they quantify the external substances and pollutants to which bodies are exposed. The current relationship between the body, biosensors, 3D printing, DIY electronics

and fashion-oriented design is being explored by a growing number of designers who are exploring the possibility of hybridising textile and electronic experiments - soft circuits- capable of tracking the body's biochemical states and collecting data from the environment. Marco Mancuso points out that *“biosensors mediate new relationships, straddling medical practice, self-care, self-education, and collective knowledge”* (2023).

If collecting data encourages new practices concerning bodily and somatic knowledge, computational extractivism raises many ethical questions: the individual is transformed into a user profile composed of the summation of modelling data - personal, bodily, and behavioural. Moreover, machine learning algorithms make it possible to aggregate this information in an utterly never-seen way. Beyond the logic of classical statistics, neural networks identify correlations and create new associations between data according to criteria that are incomprehensible to users and even

programmers (Benasayag & Bastien, 2022). Personal information of various kinds is replaced by the objectivity of quantitative and numerical data in a new technocratic vision, datism, which considers the universe as a set of bit streams in which “*the value of each phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing.*” (Harari, 2018, p.). As Harari points out, datism benefits from advances in the biological and computer sciences, asserting that biological or digital organisms operate according to the same mathematical laws. It blends the view of organisms as biochemical algorithms, inspired by Charles Darwin’s theory, with the capability of computer scientists to design and interpret digital algorithms in the wake of Alan Turing’s insights. This perspective erases the distinction between animals and machines, predicting that computerised algorithms will surpass their biochemical counterparts. This process builds up an algorithmic “*simulacrum of a dematerialised world*” (Benasayag & Bastien, 2022, p. 16) in which humans can no longer effectively distil information from data due to its vastness; they can only be interpretable by increasingly sophisticated processors.

From the life-mining to the *Adversarial Design*

The scenario outlined confronts us with what Braidotti calls the “*capitalisation of living matter,*” which reduces matter itself to its ability to transform both biological and intangible aspects into quantifiable information and values. Currently, the “real capital is the databases of biogenetic, neuronal, and media information about individuals” (Braidotti, 2020, p.67); therefore, “*data mining*” increasingly takes on the characteristic of “*life-mining,*” whose fundamental selection criteria are dictated by the degree of marketability of the data themselves. All these technologies are employed as surveillance devices (Braidotti, 2020, p.68) functional to generate an “*algorithmic governmentality*” detached from law, discipline and biopolitics. Subjects disconnected from the organic, social and symbolic dimensions of existence (Braidotti & Jones, 2022, p.11) are simplified and flattened by computational reality.

In this context, the design world does not relinquish the instrumental use of Artificial Intelligence. Wizinsky described the instrumental-

isation of design practices that conforming to market demands become useful means of data mining, manipulation, and exploitation for commercial purposes. “*Artificial intelligence creates a technocratic design in which data collected from billions of users are applied to generative methods of producing physical and informational products and services.*” (Wizinsky, 2022). Rather than developing new products, brands are more interested in proposing experiences and lifestyles supported by platforms and chatbots for sales assistance. The posthuman and neo-materialist approach to information technology could be a valuable tool to guide designers in delineating new realities that ethically incorporate A.I. technologies and to reorient and overcome this surveillance and control scenario. The Neo-materialist informatics (NMI) approach involves using data to imagine new assemblages of bodies and technology, models of “*alternative lives and even species*” divergent from current limited models (Braidotti & Jones, 2022, p.108). NMI is a multidisciplinary field that includes the humanities, social sciences, robotics, and artificial intelligence research. Taking up neo-materialist and post-humanist feminist perspectives, they intend to promote an approach to the design and development of technology that emphasises the active role in the reality-defining process played by non-human and technological agencies (Braidotti & Jones, 2022, pp.87-108). Following this approach, many designers and makers are adopting disruptive design practices and rebellion against the status quo, fuelling critical thinking, hypothesis formulation, imagining new models, and constructing narratives that move away from the contingent will of markets.

As evidenced by the case studies outlined in section five, designers employ a critical approach and make “*speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and facts about the role that products play in everyday life.*” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 34). Moved by ethical principles, they reflect on the possibility of a fair evolution of the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence. They highlight critical issues and distortions of a technocratic system, bringing out responsible process design and artefacts: objects capable of triggering divergent thinking, transforming the product from commodity to signifying object, able to promote an approach that allows people not to

be passively subjected to new technologies but to co-create with them. Design as a political tool is a discourse already initiated in the 1970s by Victor Papanek but which, considering the digitisation process, finds a re-actualization in *Adversarial Design* practices such as hacking, poisoning, and interference. According to Carl Di Salvo, design can play a political role in contestation by highlighting the inconsistencies of the productive and social systems. With such an approach, design becomes a tool to provide, acknowledge, and express dissent and to build pathways for change (Di Salvo, 2012, pp.12-13). Starting from the Critical Design framework, the antagonistic role of *Adversarial Design* results in artefacts that materialise and solicit recognition of political demands, express dissent, and advance claims. On a practical level, designers intersecting fashion-oriented design practices and hacker ethics try to shed light on political, social, economic, and cultural relations to identify new methods for contestation and new trajectories for action. As pointed out by Otto von Busch, “*hacking*” does not mean destroying the system but instead using design to manifest dissent, bring out the critical points of the current society, and actively promote development in a desirable direction through practical interventions (Von Busch, 2014, p.50).

The *Ubiquitous Surveillance* through A.I.

The *Internet of People* scenario outlined so far thus unveils how uncontrollable and profound the growing invasion of *A.I.-based* technologies and their absorption actions are now. Having highlighted the operations of bodily datafication and consequent tracking of biometric data, let us now turn our gaze to the *neuromarketing* and behavioural monitoring actions to which we are continually subjected online. We can speak of actual *ubiquitous surveillance* as the dominant mechanism of the contemporary scenario, which sees the invasion and appropriation of personal experience as the basis of a new economic order. Although we have already been surrounded for years by smart devices that can answer our questions and with which to engage in short conversations (think of Siri, Echo and so-called *conversational agents* or “CAs”), it is in recent times that the exaggerated rise of deep learning systems, based on self-learning, has fuelled doubts

about how they work and the obscure processes that govern them, in terms of privacy and protection of sensitive data. Companies such as Google or Apple have long understood the immense potential that the action of collecting data from users could have in the dynamics of contemporary digital capitalism (Zuboff, 2018).

Data, or as Zuboff calls it, “*the behavioural surplus*,” gives companies insight into the interests and habits of users. For strategic and commercial purposes, user monitoring results in covert conditioning to personalise the experience on online platforms. Inputs and advertisements continually target users, all born from scanning registered interests to engage and trigger unconscious processes to sell further products or fuel other interactions.

The extreme tracking to which we are subjected, the ability of devices to anticipate our choices, to pick up on our interests “*through increasingly abstract, invisible and automated control systems*” (Monahan, 2015, p.3) trigger deep and troubling reflections on our privacy security. The contemporary CAs with which we weave networks of conversations and requests and from which we get personalised feedback function as “*a single collective machine...a reservoir of human attention and input that acts as a reservoir of information for computational inference.*” (Finn, 2018, p.191)

The predictive systems that govern the algorithms are based on databases, which, unintentionally or unconsciously, we are the ones who build through our online interactions, researching and buying products, and choosing a movie or a piece of music. Like contemporary oracles, the algorithms behind platforms that have now permeated our daily lives, such as Netflix or Amazon, “*know our tastes even before we imagine them.*” and through collaborative filtering, manage to return us products or services we did not know we needed (Vespignani & Rijntano, 2019, p.149).

Surrounded by increasingly intelligent devices, individuals are constantly under observation; algorithms can read our emotions, predict our choices, and invade our unconscious. “*The new frontier of surveillance triangulates all data to increase accuracy and achieve omniscience over individuals...the global growth of ubiquitous computing enables Ubiquitous Surveillance.*” (Bianchini & Morozumi, 2021, p.136).

Poisoning A.I. through Contemporary Fashion and Jewellery

The growing fear that this relentless surveillance and data collection endangers the privacy of individuals is becoming increasingly accurate. The realisation that the predictive work of devices often removes us from autonomous choice by depriving us of countless possibilities, almost forcing us to accept suggested outcomes, has triggered and found a response in the design field. Some designers are picking up on the rising need to counter the action of tracking personal data and have designed products that can circumvent or combat surveillance operations. Several designers have imbued their products with countervailing power, from parasite devices to disruptive fashion proposals, by implementing poisoning or interfering operations against surveillance devices. The case studies presented in the section are divided into two categories: artefacts that counter

the behavioural monitoring process and objects that oppose body datification [fig. 03].

Concerning the first category, *Accessories For The Paranoid* (2017) is a project born from the collaboration of designers Katja Trinkwalder and Pia-Marie Stute, who conceived of a series of devices capable of interfering with the data collection system implemented by commonly used devices. Parasite devices have been designed to avoid using technology just to safeguard privacy. These objects exploit the data collection mechanism to their advantage, intervening in the relationship between the user and technology and creating a series of fictitious feedback. Linked to *conversational agents* or about platforms such as Amazon, accessories can create “noise” or confuse algorithms by distracting them with random queries or searches. As described by the designer, “Amazon wish lists will be filled with unexpected wants...social media accounts will spread non-specific likes. In Google search, partially typed requests will be dynamically continued through autocomplete.” (Stute, 2019) is an operation that keeps sensitive data safe under a blanket of false information.

Similarly, exciting case studies include *CounterBug* (2019) by Erlend Prendergast, which likewise interferes with the devices, blocking their surveillance; *Smell of Data* (2016) by Leanne Wijnsma, and *Winston* (2019) by U.S. start-up Winston Privacy, that instead implement an alert action, in order to signal possible dangerous monitoring activities.

Concerning the second category, several design projects aim to counter the increasingly widespread use of technologies that can track individuals’ biometric data. Born from this same need is *Cap_able* (2019), an Italian start-up launched by Rachele Didero and Federica Busani to inform and raise awareness about the danger and ethicality of the spread of the surveillance phenomenon.

The *Manifesto* collection includes knitted garments characterised by patterns called adversarial patches that can interfere with the artificial intelligence algorithms with which cameras are equipped and fool them to avoid the identification of the wearer. Also based on the same principles is *Jammer Coat* (2014), launched by Coop studio Himmelb(l)au. The coat, characterised by a unique polka dot texture, would be able to distort the figure of the wearer, hiding the wearer’s identity from the eyes of

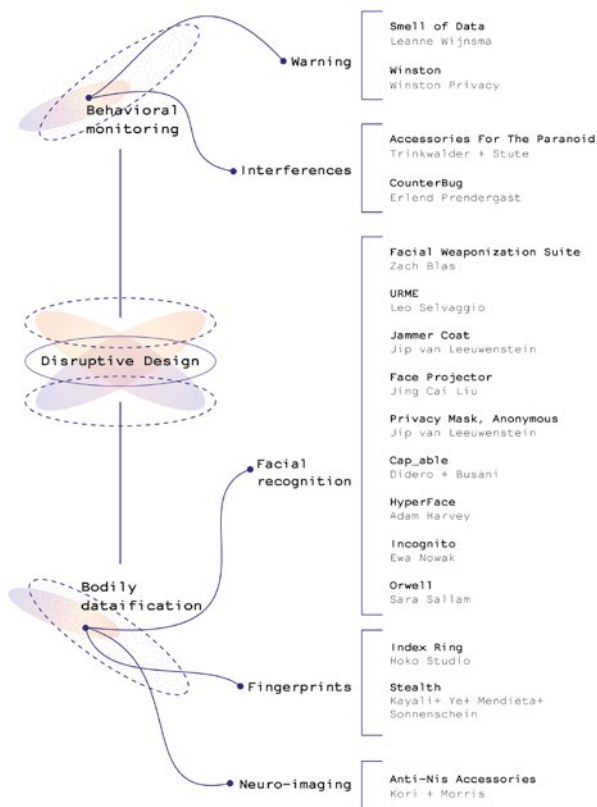


Fig. 3

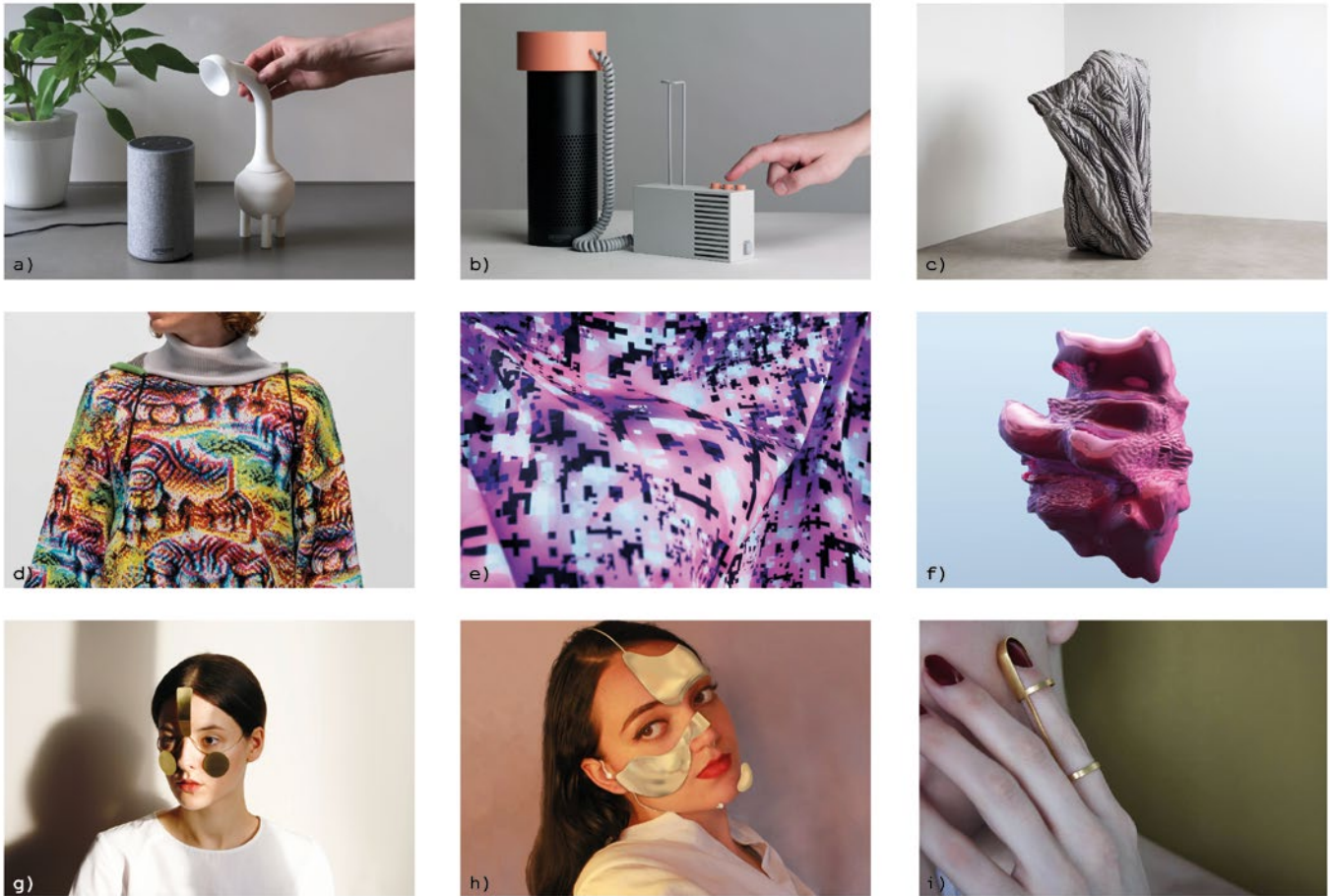


Fig. 4

the cameras. Also equipped with special internal metal coatings, it could shield our devices and credit cards from being tracked or cloned, even eluding the geolocation system. Similarly, Adam Harvey created *HyperFace* (2017), an anti-surveillance camouflage pattern that circumvents the action of facial recognition. American designer Sara Sallam has been working in a kindred way to create face and body jewellery that can render the recognition action of public cameras futile. *The Orwell* (2020) anti-tracking capsule collection consists of different accessories that protect the wearer and preserve their privacy. The mask devised by the designer modifies the proportions and geometries of the face, making the wearer invisible to surveillance; the armour bodice would instead protect against laser technologies capable of picking up the heartbeat; finally, the shoe accessory, by interrupting bipedal symmetry, would be able to fool technologies capable of detecting someone by their gait.

Before Sallam, other designers conceived jewellery that counteracts the action of recognition and tracking, including *Incognito* (2019) face jewellery by Ewa Nowak and *Index Ring* (2013) gold jewellery that hides fingerprints by Hoko Studio. Other designers made facial accessories and masks like *URME* (2013) resin masks by Leo Selvaggio, which reproduced a faithful copy of the designer's face, *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2012) "collective masks" by Zach Blas, amorphous masks, made to counter the inequalities and biases triggered by the use of biometric tracking technologies, *Privacy Mask*, *Anonymous* (2017) deforming masks by Jip van Leeuwenstein [fig. 04].

Conclusions. A disruptive approach to A.I.

The projects of the identified fashion and jewellery designers reflect the needs and worries of a critical contemporaneity about A.I. We have official-

ly entered the era of covert surveillance and conditioning by A.I.. How can design culture actively provide us with an alternative to freedom and privacy protection?

The contribution intends to solicit actions concerning these questions, placing in fashion and design practice a real possibility of 'poisoning' and subverting the prevailing technological system. It is not a question of opposing A.I. definitively but, on the contrary, of understanding it in depth and cooperating with it to redefine our irreducible characteristics as humans.

With a disruptive approach to A.I., the project can become a driving agent for a vision that foregrounds the human being with his qualities, re-orienting the integration and acquisition of data, behaviours, and influences according to trajectories of potential governability.

Combining critique and creativity, the projects illustrated here are part of this partnership between humans and non-humans through a conscious processuality capable of governing aesthetic languages and bodily interactions with the self. Extending hacking practices to fashion and jewellery allows for acts of contestation, provocation, and dissent through the typical design tools. These strategies can affect the cultural substratum, its rituals, objects, and meanings, succeeding in reorienting everyday practices. By acting on individuals and thus on the community, the aim is to encourage the emergence of a counter-system and the construction of paths of change.

By rethinking our bodies as part of a continuum between natural and artificial, in a dialectical relationship between heterogeneous subjectivities, the contribution restores to the human the decision-making possibility of assuming behaviours of active responsibility and personal choice. But, only by entering AI's processual and technological dynamics can we think it is possible to initiate concrete trajectories of modelling and conscious use of technologies.

Acknowledgements

The paper illustrates part of the Authors' contribution to the project "Designing with more-than-humans" (Call for Young Researchers 2022), funded by the University of Campania "L. Vanvitelli" and coordinated by C. Scarpitti.

Author Contributions

C.S. is mainly responsible for paragraphs 1 and Conclusions; A.B. is mainly responsible for paragraphs 2 and 3; R.L.M. for paragraphs 4 and 5. The authors wrote the Abstract collaboratively.

Captions

[fig. 01] Computer vision algorithms rely on codified rules to interpret the world. Through the lens of a camera, sensor, or scanner, they look for specific configurations of data, sets of relationships, patterns, and predefined geometries. The programs search the image databases used in the training phase for specific light and shadow configurations. Some camouflage patterns are designed to fool detection mechanisms, preventing subject identification. Image by the authors.

[fig. 02] Biometric data is collected from various sources, including public and private devices, software, and applications. The image illustrates the supervised machine learning (ML) prediction process using the "object detection model". This technique uses bounding box labels, which are rectangular regions used in computer vision (CV), to identify the contents of an image. The model learns from the information within the rectangle to predict the presence of similar objects in new, unseen data. Image by the authors.

[fig. 03] The diagram summarises the case studies analysed, divided according to the tracking technology they intend to counter. The sabotage of behavioural monitoring occurs through Warning and Interference, while the hacking of body tracking technologies blocks facial recognition, fingerprinting, and neuroimaging. Image by authors.

[fig. 04] Images of the main case studies: a) Counter-Bug (2019) by Erlend Prendergast. b) Accessories For The Paranoid (2017) by Katja Trinkwalder and Pia-Marie Stute. c) Jammer Coat (2014) by Coop Himmelb(l)au studio. d) Cap_able (2019) by Rachele Didero and Federica Busani. e) HyperFace (2017) by Adam Harvey. f) Facial Weaponization Suite (2012) by Zach Blas. g) Incognito (2019) by Ewa Nowak. h) Orwell (2020) by Sara Sallam. i) Index Ring (2013) by Hoko Studio.

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