

# The Body Hactivism Movement: A Talk About the Body

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## ABSTRACT

This paper talks about the body in a movement of extreme body modification called Body Hactivism. The aspiration of this movement is to unite hacking, body modification and activism. The Body Hactivism is a current whose enthusiasts are found in different places in Europe, the United States, and South-America, and are connected through a network. Alongside the fieldwork, it is noticeable that many times the body hactivists' accounts do not converge into a single version of what the movement is. Beyond that, their accounts about the body vary consistently, interfering directly in their body-related practices. The interviews presented partially here are the fruit of ethnographic research with body hactivists from Europe and Brazil. In their speech about Body Hactivism and the body this paper will try to shed light on the way they manage the complexity of their speech associated with body transformation, by paying more attention to the details of social life. Diverse questions can be raised regarding the appropriateness of various body enactments in the actors' speeches. Starting from the assumption that "nature/body" and "culture/modification" are not two completely distinct domains, this research is built by incorporating the issues of the ontological border set between these two concepts. By trying to trace interactions involved in this wide phenomenon, I expect to have unique insights into how ideas such as nature, culture, body modification, and technology are intertwined regarding Body Hactivism in contemporary society.

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## 1. How to talk about the body? Beyond dichotomous ontologies

Over the past thirty years, there has been a major effort of reflection on the articulation of social practices and symbolic anthropology whose objective is to

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examine the ontological border based on the opposition between nature and culture. Philippe Descola<sup>1</sup> points out the way to liberation from Western dichotomies based on the classical distinction between nature and culture<sup>2</sup>. Natural is understood to be what is produced independently of human will and action, what existed before mankind and will continue to exist after it. On the other hand, cultural is evidenced by what is produced by human action, such as objects, ideas, and institutions. For over a century, cultural and social anthropology have been defined as a science of nature-culture mediation. And the dualism between nature and culture, in which we have associated with the last third of the 19th century, took place in Europe as an epistemological organization that produced simultaneous distinctions of different orders and diverse ways of learning about a phenomenon (Descola, 2011). By affirming that the world was composed of natural, cultural and human entities, the principles of our Eurocentric cosmology were founded and "nature became something external to humans in Europe at the end of the Renaissance, and the scientific developments were made possible" (Descola, 2010, p.59).

In the last thirty years a wide range of scholars have recognized that the division between what is widely perceived as cultural and natural is constructed and largely arbitrary (See Latour, 1994). Once we understand this steady division as a child of Modernity<sup>3</sup> (not existing as it presumes) we are able to move forward in order to find a response to these dilemmas. Human experience must be understood as the result of two distinct fields, but coexistent despite the fact that it is governed by different principles (Descola, 2006, 2010, 2011). This theoretical shift affects our traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Descola is a French anthropologist and ethnologist. He is foreign member of British Academy and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is specialist in the relations set between humans and nature, and in France he became a major figure in Americanist anthropology.

<sup>2</sup> His theories can be found especially in the following works: *Par-delà nature et culture (Beyond nature and culture)*, *L'écologie des autres: l'anthropologie et la questions de la nature (The ecology of others: anthropology and questions about nature)* and *Diversité des natures, diversité des cultures (Diversity of natures, diversity of cultures)*. Descola exposes diverse ontologies and relationships by taking the main anthropological theories regarding heterogeneous relations between humans and non-humans. After his ethnographic experience in the Amazon with the Indians named *Jivaros* (who used to name themselves as *Achuar*, however) he started to raise questions related to what seemed to go beyond differences between humans and non-humans and what belonged to nature and to culture. This division, which seems so natural to westernized eyes, is ignored not only among the *Achuar* but also in other different places such as among the aborigines of Oceania (Descola, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Following Latour in *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes (We have never been modern)* the word "modern" is used to contrast an archaic and stable past. He argues that the "Modern Constitution" (constitution because it is also about political representation) consists in a mode of classification or an ideology that accounts for how we classified the world, the subjects and objects. But this constitution does not correspond to real practices. The guarantees of this constitution are: a) nature is "transcendent", b) society is "immanent", c) the translation process between these two realms does not exist, and d) they suppressed God who was relegated to the sidelines. And the Modern constitution hid what was happening

conception of the human being, its components, individual and collective identity, because dualism has generated concrete consequences for how anthropology is practiced, notably: 1) in the characterization of its object, 2) in the definition of its methods and finally 3) in the principles produced.

To follow this new road, I might pursue the relationships established among entities, knowing that their ontological status and action capacity vary according to the positions they occupy in relation to each other. This road could be named the symmetrical anthropology (Latour 1994, Descola 2011), i.e., it consists of restoring “nature and society, humans and non-humans, individuals and groups, in a new set where they are not presented as distributed among substances, processes and representations” (Descola, 2011, p.13). Symmetrical anthropology values equally the poles, nature and culture, and considers the hybrids<sup>4</sup> produced in the mediation process between them. This anthropology was instituted by the “sociology of associations” (Latour, 2005) – popularly known as Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)—to systematize the possible (or impossible) settings of humans, non-humans and hybrids.

I have included this brief consideration to underline that by using the words “body” and “modification” I do not want to put into operation *a priori* meanings, for instance that the “body” belongs to nature while the “modification” to culture. If I make use of the previous words it is because I lack more appropriate terms to define the triptych correlation among body, individual, and society. Yet, the previous terms used here do not carry this exhaustive dichotomy and its meanings into the Body Hactivism<sup>5 6</sup> movement—at least this is our hypothesis. Our body-talk approach comprehends the move toward “learning to be affected” (Latour, 2004). Constantly involved in an apprenticeship, the body develops its sensitivity in relation to the world and its constituent elements. It also produces a dynamic trajectory as a result of engaging in different ways of learning to register sundry entities, turning out to be increasingly more sensitive to what the world is made of and even more describable as it learns to be affected by those sundry entities. Faithful to this principle, it becomes meaningless to conceptualize the body itself, create a theoretical approach addressed to different representations of the body or relate it to a place of symbolic investment.

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in the middle of these poles: a system that mixes politics, sciences, technology and nature, defined as hybrids (Latour 1994)

<sup>4</sup> Called “quasi-object” and “quasi-subject” (Latour 1994)

<sup>5</sup> The term *Hactivism* was openly used and spread for the first time 1996 by Omega, a member of a hacker group known as *Cult of the Dead Cow* (cDc). Omega used this term to describe the “hacking” with a political purpose. ([http://www.cultdeadcow.com/cDc\\_files/cDc-0384.php](http://www.cultdeadcow.com/cDc_files/cDc-0384.php))

<sup>6</sup> Currently the term Hactivism is commonly used to define the union between political activism and computer hacking (Denning, 1999; National Infrastructure Protection Center, 2001)

## 2. The Body Hactivism movement: defining some terms

The Body Hactivism movement was created in 2000 by a French body modification artist and photographer named Lukas Zpira. Its enthusiasts—defined as body hactivists or body hackers—aim to work empirically and conceptually around the possibility of a body modified by technology. Lukas Zpira introduced Body Hactivism as a philosophy that encompasses independent artists, researchers and thinkers working around technological, futurist, prospective and functional bodily mutations. The founder introduces the source of inspiration coming from comics such as manga, science-fiction movies and similar literature.

To regain some sense of order, I should start by defining certain terms, rather than taking them as given. Since I have already discussed the issues *a propos* the body, let's move to "hacking". Regarding cybernetics, it refers to a person -- usually known as a "hacker"—whose goal is to master informatics tools and their operating systems. A hacker makes use of technological tools and also adapts their operations after extensive research. Once he/she discovers the functioning of these tools, the hacker does not hesitate to make modifications in accordance to his/her needs. The hackers' behavior is transposable conceptually to what Fiévet (2012) defines as "body hacking", except that it is suitable to the human body. Fiévet advocates that body hacking consists of a voluntary initiative carried out by individuals who are willing to alter their bodies by linking artificial components to them, as well as new technological devices that can be applicable to the body<sup>7</sup>. The body hackers try to transform their natural behavior and develop new senses in order to undergo new bodily experiences. They consider the body to be a flexible material on which they can act: a transformable, improvable and augmentable entity. Fiévet characterizes body hacking as a hybrid tendency situated between hacking—previously defined—and bio-hacking<sup>89</sup>. Especially important is the fact that the body hacking tendency also telescopes within extreme artistic approaches. It is here where I turn my focus to the Body Hactivism movement. Body hacking had been carried out for a long time by the most committed enthusiasts

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<sup>7</sup> The addition of technological components in the human body is not a novelty in itself. In the medical field, we have witnessed the emergence of contact lenses, pacemakers, breast implants, cochlear implants etc. However, the novelty resides in the emergence of a trend moving towards the body and electronic components' fusion, for recreation and functional purpose. That is to say, to make possible the coexistence of mechanical parts or electronic components with human organs.

<sup>8</sup> Bio-hacking is currently composed of amateurs interested in the possibilities of cell function and DNA learning, and those of experimental biology and biotechnology.

<sup>9</sup> <http://biohack.me>

of extreme body modification, and among them I find Lukas Zpira, who claims to be the first body modifier and artist to have an RFID microchip<sup>10</sup> implanted under the skin.

Let's move on to the next term: hacktivism. This term was openly used and spread for the first time in 1996 by Omega, a member of a hacker group known as *Cult of the Dead Cow* (cDc). Omega used this expression to describe "hacking" with a political purpose. Currently Hacktivism is commonly used to define the union between political activism and computer hacking (Denning, 1999; National Infrastructure Protection Center, 2001). And the Body Hacktivism movement, according to Lukas, is loaded with activism tendencies and concerns. This element is articulated alongside the theoretical development of this movement's characteristics. Through a critical regard launched in technology's generalization and its misuse, they suggest it could be employed against individual interests. Once the previous definitions are in place, I am able to pursue the next steps.

### 3. Research questions and objectives

This paper is part of doctoral research in the social sciences. Looking for categories and theory formation through ethnographic data<sup>11</sup>, the main questions it raises are: how does the Body Hacktivism movement appropriate body modification techniques in contemporary culture? How does the body learn to be affected by the connections established by actors<sup>12</sup>? How does the body hacktivists' discourse hang together? This research aspires to identify how actors can mobilize a set of body modification practices, techniques, and discourses and propose considerations that can help to visualize "peculiar" transformations related to the body and technology, currently taking place in the West.

Two aspects of this research require elucidation before continuing. First, this is an empirical study. The story I will present here is part of wider ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted in France<sup>13</sup> from November 2011 through October 2012. It was situated

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<sup>10</sup> Radio-Frequency Identification

<sup>11</sup> In short, we refer to grounded theory, a systematic methodology in the social sciences domain that involves theory discovery and of category creation from data collection.

<sup>12</sup> "When we speak of actors we have to add the large network of attachments making it act" (Latour, 2005, p. 217)

<sup>13</sup> Beyond the actors mentioned who were interviewed in this paper, a solid number of contacts and interviews have already been established and will constitute the final work of this research. The actors are from different locations, for instance, France, Italy, the United States and Brazil. Some representative actors of the extreme body modification scene we can mention are: Steve Haworth, Fakir Musafar, Jim Ward, Steve Joyner, Allen Falkner and Russ Fox.

in very different places, such as tattoo and piercing shops, hotels, events, and seminars located in several European countries and in the United States of America. Second, I present myself as outsiders. I am not member of this group, i.e., I do not share the characteristics, roles or experiences regarding body modification within the participants of this study<sup>14</sup>.

For this paper, I selected four interviewees<sup>15</sup> with the purpose of offering a picture of what Body Hacktivism is. It consists of the founder's interview and two other body hacktivists engaged in body-related activities. From it I try to make visible the *worknets/networks*<sup>16</sup> established by the actors<sup>17</sup>. There are many body hacktivists that could be mentioned here<sup>18</sup>. What I want to discuss is that the individual attempts mentioned here seem to be part of a current related to human hacking. Their aim is to understand body functioning through experiments and technology's potential to improve the human body.

The way in which ethnography is written is a kind of "storytelling." It is a particular sort of writing that contains the interpretative exercise in it, as Geertz assumed and properly explained in *Writing Culture*. So let's begin.

#### 4. Lukas Zpira and the conception of the Body Hacktivism

This fieldwork started in November 2011 when David Le Breton introduced us to the leader of the Body Hacktivism movement, Lukas Zpira. Dr. Le Breton is a professor at the University of Strasbourg and also one of the supervisors of this research. He explained to Lukas that this doctoral investigation was dealing with Body Hacktivism movement. I believe that this first step was certainly essential, in the sense that is someone who is very much appreciated by Lukas endorsed this work, as the lectors of

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<sup>14</sup> In embodying outsiders' or insiders' roles, or any roles along the continuum, this applied research encompasses particular challenges and requires appropriate considerations. Since we are not insiders to the experience of extreme body modification, it is necessary to find ways to be immersed in this group, and the possible means to relate to them.

<sup>15</sup> The interviewees have consented to have their interviews employed for research and publishing.

<sup>16</sup> The difficulty presented by Latour (2005) about the use of the Word "network" is partly because of its ambiguities. A network can be understood simply as transporting causalities through a stabilized set of intermediaries. Conversely, the expression *worknet* could be proposed as a substitute to the former, if it had any chance to hold, since its meaning could allow the labor's visualization that goes in laying down the "net-works" (Latour, 2005). Whatever the word is, it should be understood as flows of translations (process of translation is the establishment of a relation that always involves transformation).

<sup>17</sup> Each mediator is able to enlist and be enlisted by other actors in other networks, setting up some specific network effects that exist only within these groups.

<sup>18</sup> We would like to go further in the analyses of experiences given by the actors; however we are not able to discuss every detail in this brief paper.

this essay will notice along the paper. Consequently, Lukas understood that this academic project would try to consider certain issues properly and scientifically, therefore he was willing to provide me informations whenever necessary. This particular research plan also raised some interest on his part, for the reason he planned to review the Manifesto that originated the Body Hactivism movement.

As he travels regularly to perform body modifications, body performances, and to develop his photographic works and documentary videos, it turned out that only in November we arranged our meeting<sup>19</sup>. I moved toward the empirical, eager to see what is involved in this phenomenon.

The Body Hactivism movement is not presented as Lukas Zpira's starting point. His involvement with body modification began through a personal *démarche*<sup>20</sup>. His career began in southern France together with a body modification group called Adada. By that time his main work consisted of paintings, sculptures and installations. He changed his name to Lukas Zpira in 1993, when he began his own body modifications. He was 28 years old when he pierced his nipple, which he claims was a turning point in his life. For him it meant crossing a border once he had metal objects partially inside his body, and it encouraged him to go further with more modifications. He says that he was filled with the desire to undergo a mutation, to merge his mind and body. At the same time he developed a fascination for cyberpunk culture and science fiction. Accordingly, the *mutation* started with his name. He asserts that the logical sequence of his body metamorphosis, in his words, "make my skin my medium". In 1995 he opened his piercing shop in Avignon, France. Later, he started to work with other body modifications like scarification, branding and body implants. His piercing shop also had art exhibitions, performances of various artists from the scene of body modification, and even sociologists and anthropologists who provided short lectures and seminars. Lukas said that the idea consisted of having a space dedicated to body-correlated topics, mutations and anything else considered relevant.

While performing body modification, he was seen as part of the movement called "body art."<sup>21</sup> Desiring to distinguish his modifications and this movement, he asked

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<sup>19</sup> The data used here are from interviews conducted with body hactivists and later transcribed. When it is from another source, we will make the proper reference to it.

<sup>20</sup> In the artistic terminology, *démarche* means the way chosen by an artist to conduct his reflections through successive works.

<sup>21</sup> "Body art" is a genre of art in which the artist's body is the work canvas. The artists of this movement claim total domination of the body design and the exploration of all its possibilities through a radical artistic expression. This movement began in the sixties and took various artistic practices done to the body, such as tattooing, scarification, body painting, piercing, and sadomasochistic practices. This movement is considered by some body modifiers as the bodily performances' "rescuer".

himself: "What do I want to say through my work? At this moment I decided to write a manifesto, the Body Hactivism manifesto". Lukas refers to the *Body Hactivism: a manifesto*.

Created at the dawn of the twenty-first century by Lukas Zpira under the impulse of Ryoichi Maeda, the term body hactivism was born from the necessity to define a movement of artists, researchers and thinkers working around mutations and using body modifications as a medium. These artists, as opposed to Modern Primitives<sup>22</sup> who use tribal anthropology as their basis, practice, theorize and/or invent prospective avant-garde body modifications which are influenced by manga culture, comics, science fiction films and literature (...). Body Hactivism also poses the question on the freedom of choices concerning an ever increasing number of transformation options humankind is facing and re-evaluates the notion of collective interest versus individual interest (...). (Zpira, 2010, no page number).

Written in a dissertation structure, this manifesto associates body issues with political, artistic and philosophical issues. Lukas talks about art and the possibility of its use to transmit ideas. Besides, he defines the body as a tool enabling ideas' materialization and the means to ideas' and utopias' dissemination. He identifies the body as the world's primary interface; consequently by changing it one stirs society's borders. Society is presented as conservative, disruptive of individual liberties and in need of transformation. He urges people to take their own future in their hands by questioning what society calls "collective interest" that interferes with individual liberty. The choice of evolution is in individuals' hands; meanwhile the perpetual mutation is waiting to be initiated by people.

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<sup>22</sup> Lukas alludes to body art (see footnote number 17) and the Modern Primitives. This is an especially important movement that is often appealed to by writers, researchers, and body modifiers when the topic is extreme body modification. In the sixties, some tattoo artists decided to appropriate certain body modification techniques and styles performed in traditional societies. They aimed to develop a new relation to the body favoring the "primitive" dimension as an alternative source to discover body possibilities (Rosenblatt, 1997). In 1989 several body artists and performers published a magazine called RE/search#12 (Vale & Juno, 1989) that encouraged radical body modifications at both an individual and collective level. Those modifications and techniques were then defined by the magazine as "primitive". Since then, RE/search#12 became the main reference for body piercers and tattooists. At the same time, also in the United States, a man known as Fakir Musafar captured people's attention because of his peculiar relationship with his body. He was used to practicing by himself piercing, branding, burning and stretching, among many others practices based on traditional societies and "spiritually-oriented." From his various extreme body modifications and taking into account ritualistic fragments, he claims to be the founder of the movement that became referenced in the extreme body modification context due to the particularity of its *stereotyped* practices: the "Modern Primitives" (Le Breton, 2004).



Body Hactivism is loaded with activist notion for Lukas. The activist dimension of this movement is articulated through its critical regard launched in technology's generalization and misuse that can be used against individual interests: "We have wonderful technologies, but many of them are being introduced in our midst and giving an end to our privacy and liberty". He comments:

This is why it is so important to understand these technologies and its possibilities, to advance into the future and to be aware of what the governments can do with it and stay one step ahead, being informed and possibly offer services such as chip's removal, let's say if one day we reach a point where it becomes mandatory from birth.

According to Lukas' perspective, in the face of technological development, new technologies may become mandatory, or at least pressures will be exerted on people leading them to adopt them. Intending to justify his thoughts he quotes the RFID subcutaneous implants' example and VeriChip controversy. He assumes that even if people decide not to use it, regardless of the reason, humankind may reach a period when the entire network will be integrated; consequently the individuals who decided not to have it will be excluded from its potential benefits. He emphasizes that we live in an era when medical and technological discoveries surpasses individuals; therefore Body Hactivism's purpose consists of showing that:

It is not a question of wanting it or not, it is a matter of understanding that somehow it will happen. But at this time it will get to us even if we do not choose it. In this sense, we must choose the reasons why they will reach us.

Lukas draws attention to the fact that humanity has experienced many changes due to the scientific knowledge development that is considered legitimate by society. He refers to fields such as biomedicine, artificial intelligence, and cybernetics, which have presented a new shift regarding humanity's physical evolution opportunities. Lukas is convinced that the body made in God's image is a notion that is currently questionable, whereas we have been manipulating and replacing parts of the body, often due to medical developments. For him, this demonstrates that the *natural body* no longer exists, making feasible the extension of its possibilities. Therefore evolution may not pass anymore via a natural mode as it has been seen in our evolutionary chain. In

pointing out that society has been challenged with a diverse evolution method created by men, Lukas argues that each individual ought to have the right to choose to go for it or not, i.e., to possess the right of governing his/her own body. With respect to it, the reflection about human evolution associated with technology is defined as the basic feature necessary to label who could potentially be an enthusiast of this movement, Lukas asserts. After all, he does not want to confine this movement to a group of extremely modified people, as other body modification movements. The body hackers must approach body modification and futuristic transformations vis-à-vis human advancement theoretically.

He tries to articulate some distinctions among those people who modify their bodies. It is based on the following points: reflection and lack of reflection on inherent issues which constitute body modification and evolution of the body and the concept of humanity; with the intention of belonging to particular groups or imitation, esthetics, or political expression. And the key issue of Body Hacking is the desire to change the body inculcated with the notion of hacking and activism. Allied with both, awareness about pertinent changes will occur in relation to the body, human evolution and transformations linked to science, technology and biotechnology.

So far I have insisted on the Body Hacking movement's ideological approach. I can now at last move to practicalities, which, in Lukas' eyes, consist of evolving along with technology and what he has done regarding body hacking. I could say that from Lukas' perspective there is continuity between his organism and the technology that is created through his modification work. The devices and the products that he develops are mediators in the process of evolving toward a future of human-machine coexistence.

The primary body modifications that Lukas has are two subdermal implants in both calves, beads in his chest, transdermal implants<sup>23</sup> in his scalp and an RFID chip. In addition, since 2008 Lukas has been working on a project dubbed M.A.T.S.I (Multi Application Titanium Skin Interface). It consists of a two-inch round titanium plate designed to replace part of his skin – in other words, the creation of a titanium skin. If it succeeds as the project design, it will serve as a receptacle for different components. Lukas describes it as similar to a transdermal implant but in reverse, creating a hole that penetrates the skin. He explains that this project is meant to function as an interface between the body and the environment, eventually serving as a pod capable of confining an electronic component, such as an iPod or an mp3 player. He likes the

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<sup>23</sup> It consists of an object placed both below and above the skin.

idea of having an iPod in his forearm, and being able to plug in a headset and listen to music; "I come from a pop culture too," he comments. Lukas said that when he created this implant he intended to modify his "reception interface," which he defines as his connection with the world. The target was the production of a recreational and functional device. Naturally, many difficulties emerged, and he mentions some: "When we developed the idea, very soon the technological advancements' problems became obvious. Given its exponential growth, it would require an implant easily modifiable, removable, able to encapsulate different pieces of technology without problems".

For a long time he has been thinking of this specific functional implant, but the main difficulty he found was technological (that offered other challenges such as memory capacity and processing power issues), in addition to the power requirement necessary to recharge electronic devices. He states that the first prototype was implemented in 2010 and tested for eight months. Then he removed it to see if the skin would recover appropriately and, as it did, he was able to create another version of it. The solution for some of the issues mentioned above became visibly easier to respond to when he decided to create a transdermal component, enabling it to be removed from the pod and be charged or changed. And in case there is another problem or even someone's lack of interest in keeping the implant, with this experimental project he found that the skin tissue is able to recover. The first test was conclusive, he guarantees. The skin recovered, implying that he does not need to be a "prisoner" of a unique technology. Having this implant inside the body does not differ much from those who already live with portable technology in everyday life: "The connection is already done and the big challenge is the moral issue". He sees objections to the issue from society's system of morality, while for him body modifications linked to technology are a logical evolutionary continuation.

#### **4.1 Urd body modifier and body hacktivist**

Another body hacker is known as Urd. He was the second body hacker that I talked with. He was the first to be mentioned by Lukas Zpira, as he helps him, along with Samppa von Cyborg, to invent and operate new functional devices. I met him for the first time in March 2012, in Paris, France. In the midst of body modifiers, professionals often mention him as an important modifier who works with technological components.

When Urd talks about the body, he says that over the course of time he has been convinced that the body is a raw material adaptable to numerous alterations, both

permanent and temporary. It prompted him to learn more about the body's potential and boundaries. This attempt has been happening through a personal search on body modification and a willingness to discover what could be the result of certain variations. According to him, the relative freedom of social norms in France is increasing people's willingness to modify their bodies. He says it would be a positive sign if one considers that prejudice towards modified people could consequently be reduced. On the other hand, the negative side is that it could lead to what he calls "formatted body marks". The standardization of modifications is suggested as factor that inhibits body modification's milieu innovation, and for this reason he is in favor of this evolution that Body Hacktivism stands for.

Urd had some challenges in defining what Body Hacktivism is. He says it is not an easy task to find a definition for Body Hacktivism. Initially he points out two categories: the first one is composed of professionals willing to make bodily modifications their clients. At the same time, these professionals possibly may have their own body modifications as their personal démarche. The second category consists of clients with a personal démarche on modifying their bodies. While for Lukas Zpira the way to differentiate a body hacker among other body modifiers is fairly clear, Urd assumes that it is more complex to do so. For him what is at stake is above all the professional role, since body modifiers are the only ones who could advance and spread the techniques, procedures, instruments, and materials' improvement, while clients would simply have it employed on their behalf. Doubtlessly he found it troubling to define the movement, perhaps because it was the first time someone had questioned it, as he said, or because it was really not something definitely clear for him either. It was probably an opportunity for him to elaborate on a discourse about it. Yet at this point, Urd affirms that *perhaps* what may be able to differentiate Body Hacktivism from other body modification groups is the functional character contained in its pieces. But mainly he stresses that Body Hacktivism makes possible a relation based on the mind's and body's freedom:

Body Hacktivism is more a state of mind. It is true that we can often *make* Body Hacktivism through body modification. There are many artists who are body hackers and do not pass through the body modification, though. For instance, artists who make body suspensions, adherents of the cyberpunk movement and researchers. There are body hacktivists who have a free mind and a free body, and they may not pass necessarily through body modification.

He goes further. When it comes to personal evolution, Urd ponders that the body's metamorphosis does not have to be necessarily linked to the employment of technology—differently from Lukas' account. For Urd it may vary in style, level, and limits according to the individual's will. It depends mostly on the body project that each person may have idealized, he says. Nevertheless:

“For one person the evolution can happen, for example, when he cuts his tongue. For someone the desire is to become a reptile. So, he will cut his tongue and do other things to be closer to this ideal, for example, to become a hybrid with a reptile. For another person perhaps he will pass through the cybernetic dimension.”

He enlarges the range of possible modifications that people can undergo and yet be qualified as body hactivists. He puts great emphasis on the personal body project and experience, insofar that for Lukas it is interrelated with scientific progress. And it could probably be pointed out as a big issue, since the relation set by the body and the modifications do not converge in a single version of what Body Hactivism is about. Thinking in terms of articulations, this controversy does not present any trauma, because I do not expect accounts to converge into one single version of what Body Hactivism is. Urd can articulate new collectives playing a role in Body Hactivism.

For Urd, the development of devices and implants may have the goal of ameliorating the human body, “until it is able to help in daily life”. He mentioned the idea of creating a hard disk to be implanted under skin, a project he has been developing with Samppa von Cyborg. He says that this project may take some time to become a reality. It is necessary to create a network of different professionals specialized in diverse fields of knowledge in order to make the project a reality, minimizing the potential troubles. Another implant he mentioned that is approaching completion is a genital vibrator implant being developed jointly by him along with Samppa. He says that, as happened to Lukas' titanium skin, in order to create some devices that will be implanted in the body it is necessary to have the right technological components that can, for instance, maximize the battery's durability.

If I am to consider Urd's descriptions of Body Hactivism, I can qualify the modifications he proposed as seeking to enrich the senses and endow the body with new functionalities. The Body Hactivism principle is intended to enhance human capabilities by pushing its limits. It happens through experiments, establishing contacts,

conducting research, and trying to innovate. Skilled body modifiers, techniques of the body, appropriated dispositions of the mind, quasi-scientific expertise of the objects involved and adeptness at managing their knowledge according to their projects can be said to constitute Body Hactivism's main practices.

#### **4.2 Yann Minh and the augmented man in the cyberspace**

Yann Minh is a science-fiction writer, multimedia artist, documentary filmmaker and infographist. Our meeting was in Paris, at his house, we discussed his science fiction and body-related books, science fiction images, posters, and computers. He defines his work as belonging to the field of cybernetics and contemporary art. He said his first contact with Lukas Zpira took place around fifteen years ago when he got an invitation from him to show his works at an art exhibition in Avignon, France. I asked if he had heard about the Body Hactivism ideology through this contact with Lukas, and it came as a rather big surprise when he replied it was just the opposite. He told us, "for more than thirty years I have been developing works like these, at the level of expression, graphic design, and talking about the body's transformation, but in the spirit of science fiction, of the cyborg". He understands he was invited to this art exhibition because of his elaborated discourse:

I built an elaborated discourse, and I do not just make art. Besides, I am not physically modified; I do not want to have body piercings, tattoos, or make implants in my body. This is not my work's focus. On the other hand, my work is oriented to this approach. So, what happened is that Lukas and other body hackers started to invite me often to help and to collaborate with them.

He put great stress in this elaborated discourse, which is important because for him it plays a role that brings legitimacy in this milieu. He defines himself as a body hacktivist, but not as militant as Lukas is. He establishes the following differentiation: an activist of reality and of virtuality. He says his role is to benefit from Body Hactivism in order to work with possibilities of the imaginary, therefore being an activist of virtual reality. For him it is crucial to distinguish his engagement with body hacktivists' practices that should be qualified as activist, but joining another specific proposal for this ideology. Along with his work as a body hacktivist, he wants to demonstrate the potential transformations that human's body is subject to, stating that it is not about *natural* transformations. Thus the advancement he provides to Body Hactivism is situated in

the level of cybernetics, the augmented body, and science-fiction literature regarding the human-machine fusion.

Yann Minh's discourse revolves around complexity and diversity, claiming Body Hactivism as one of those expressions in favor of more complexity, both cognitive and physical. He wants to explore issues such as "What is humanity?", "What is life?", and the results of his reflections regarding humanity's future are performed graphically in the domain of virtual reality. One of the major issues he examines is exploring humanity and its evolution. One of his works is the re-appropriation of a Greek figure called Stheno<sup>24</sup>. At Yann's opus *Sthéno, ou la dernière frontière*<sup>25</sup> (Stheno, or the last frontier) is an allegory designed to be exposed in *Visions du futur* (Visions of the future), a science-fiction festival that happened in Paris, 2001. He says it represents his reflection and vision about human evolution; therefore her body has its natural parts replaced by mechanical ones. The "last frontier" refers to "the last frontier found for life in its mysterious search of the macrocosm that began there millions of years ago." But in order for humanity to exceed space's frontier and survive in the galaxy "the humanity has to be transformed. And humankind's body and spirit transformation is also the last boundary to cross". In addition, this allegorical image expresses a society that is responsible for transforming humans and preparing them to conquer new territories. And only by way of human-machine symbiosis will this conquest be possible, because hybridism is part of humankind's evolution.

Another controversial feature of this allegory is the sensual body that it has; it is a very feminine and sensual body. The explanation of this correlation is meaningful in the sense that for Yann it represents the desire that humanity will keep in preserving sexuality; "We want to maintain the aesthetic of beauty and seduction, which is linked to sexuality, but sexuality is not anecdotal. It is the system that leads to life and its perpetuation. So this is why Stheno preserves these feminine attributes". He mentions the legitimization of other reproduction ways, such as artificial fertilization and biomechanical systems; however he believes that current methods of reproduction will remain the same. His work is expressed by what he calls "hyper-sexuality" and paradoxically he points out that as humanity moves toward an asexuality, this intricacy could lead humanity to coexistence:

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<sup>24</sup> Stheno, in Greek mythology, is the oldest Gorgon. The gorgons were feminine and fierce monsters. The gorgons' bodies had flakes, arms of metal, big and sharp teeth.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.yannminh.org/french/CtSteno.html>

The acceleration in which we live now is an acceleration of complexity, of its understanding as well as of its diversity. The Body Hactivism is an expression of this will for diversification, complexity, end of taboos, into the visualization of the difference as positive. The Body Hactivism is also an expression that moves toward more complexity, both cognitive and physical.

“The fusion that has been announced for decades by science fiction writers is becoming reality through the basis of scientific research”, Yann argues. To such an extent he mobilizes body, modifications, and technology in his speech as not leading to an apparent clash or a confrontation. Yann’s talk enacts Body Hactivism as a process that can be analyzed in terms of technology, cyber space, virtual reality, adaptation, and sexuality, ensuring that all entities mentioned are working efficiently in his discourse.

#### **4.3 T. Angel and the echo of Body Hactivism in Brazil**

The last body hacker I will mention is the body artist Tiago (or T. Angel) who lives at São Paulo, Brazil. I found T. Angel through his blog<sup>26</sup> as part of our continuing search for body hactivists. I contacted him to ask more about the project<sup>27</sup> quoted on his blog where he seemed to propose a discussion about transhumanism<sup>28</sup> and Body Hactivism. At this first contact he defined himself as a body hactivist inspired by the reading of Lukas Zpira’s texts, which fitted properly with his body works and ideology. After that, I arranged our interview and he was willing to share his personal experiences with body modification, hactivism, Body Hactivism in Brazil among body modifiers, and other things.

T. Angel reported first learning about body modification at an electronic music festival. There he made his first contacts with the body hactivist community. Until that day, he said he did not have any knowledge of extreme bodily transformation. His first body modification, which was a piercing, was performed at the age of fifteen. T. Angel says that this first modification was the milestone to a world of new bodily possibilities. The issue in learning to be affected is that the more you learn the more differences exist. And so, body parts are progressively acquired at the same time

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<sup>26</sup> <http://xtangelx.wordpress.com/>

<sup>27</sup> This Project is named “Ang3l: From Inhuman to Post-human”.

<sup>28</sup> The transhumanism is an intellectual and cultural movement composed of ideologists who seek to overcome the human species -- considered imperfect -- by a cyber-humanity. They think in terms of the



whereas other "counter-parts of the world" are being "introduced" and registered in new ways. Learning to be affected by the differences is a progressive enterprise that produces a sensory medium and a sensitive world. This learning is coextensive with the body. He has learned to be *effected* by the influences of that setting. It does not mean that modifications became something else, different from what they were before, but as he started to have more modifications he was able to inhabit a much more differentiated world, where there are contrasts that affect him. Currently, T. Angel has tattoos on his arms, legs and abdomen; piercings all over the body under the names "Conchs", "Tragus", "Lobes", "Bridge", "Nipple", "Navel", "Prince Albert", "Nostrils", "Labret", "Septum"<sup>29</sup>; scarifications over the left eye; both branding in his back and skin removed; tongue split and a subdermal implant on his chest.

It was at a tattoo convention in São Paulo that T. Angel met Lukas Zpira for the first time. He was impressed to see someone with implants and nonstandard extreme body modifications. And from that moment on he tried to keep updated with Lukas' activities that were being spread online. During this process, he had access to *Body Hactivism: a manifesto*. T. Angel affirms he had the same opinion concerning the intersection of body, art and society, however, until he found out the Manifesto he did not have his own categories to define his thoughts and practices. An interesting aspect that T. Angel made clear is that because body modifiers in Brazil did not know about Body Hactivism, he kept developing the same modifications with hactivist inspiration, but without referring to a body hactivist practice. Seeing my interest in research about it, he confesses to feeling much more motivated to keep mentioning again his beliefs under the name given by Lukas. Anarchism is the word he uses to define Body Hactivism, not forgetting to connect the technological aspect to it. He says Body Hactivism is the possibility to question society and its values through your own body, deciding to mark it temporarily or definitely. Anarchism is certainly an extension of Body Hactivism's version. He says that technologies are available to maximize people's potential.

He also has a critical conception of certain technologies and their impact on people's lives. He mentions a social network that, in his eyes, has the capacity to unite people virtually and segregate them physically, creating real avatars. This is just

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augmented man, *humains augmentés*. The transhumanist current is audacious to the point of not only desiring to end up with human diseases, as far as making men indestructible, immortal (Ferone, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Those names cover a wide range of jewelries that can be inserted into the body in different areas. For instance, "Prince Albert" is a male genital piercing, "Conch" is placed in the cartilage of the ear, "Nostril" can be placed anywhere on the nostril and "Labret" is placed in the center of the lower lip.

one of the negative dimensions of technological progress in his perspective. For Yann being an avatar is a positive consequence of the technological progress because it optimizes and maximizes the possibilities to meet more people and also it creates the possibility to live in another dimension

For T. Angel, with respect to the identical bodily modifications, a body hacktivist should propose some transformations, but it is not a condition of being considered one indeed. He mentions the body modifiers in Brazil who usually do not develop anything new concerning procedures and pierces. He says they reproduce what is done abroad, and many times in very fast courses when foreign professionals go to Brazil, and it does not offer them real knowledge to perform certain procedures. As a consequence, there are many professionals making irreversible procedural faults due to lack of real knowledge of this *métier* and new techniques.

T. Angel also talked about the trials and difficulties of living in a modified body in daily life. In the beginning he lost his job, people would look at him differently, and beyond that he had to contend with the wide range of stereotypes associated with him due to his appearance. He mentions the regards of curiosity and some people's astonishment when the stereotypes cast over him do not match up with who he actually is. Regarding the last, it can have great impact on him, transforming him personally, he says. What is significant about reality and living in a modified body is that it touches, it hurts, it brings joy, disappointment, and encouragement. People may interpret their bodies and their experiences, but they also live in them.

## **5 Final considerations**

Currently, body, science, and technology are experiencing a period of deep challenge, facing a new global connectivity that also creates new grounds for their association. If Body Hacktivism principles astonish some people at first, they highlight a central issue related to technology and individuals, which is a major trend moving in the direction of this fusion. Body Hacktivism is about some creative practices at the intersection of technoscience, activism, and the body. Their *démarche* shows the capacity of re-appropriation of the body. Among many possibilities, this paper could try to follow the way of reflection in terms of "tactical biopolitics". This terminology draws its inspiration from the assembly of resistant cultural practices and the intellectual development around the history of biopolitics. This approach covers numerous

intersections that are usually analyzed in a singular academic rubric (Da Costa & Philip, 2008), however at this time I do not want to use the lens of a biopolitical discourse. Certainly, this theme has many implications in the political, ethical, philosophical, or sociological domain. It brings together perspectives from science, philosophy, politics, and activism. But this investigation on the topic of Body Hactivism is an introduction, an “experiential space” of discussion in which I try to engage different discourses, meanings, histories, and practices lived with enthusiasm by body hackers, through emphasis on the study of new contemporary forms of body modification.

This paper’s approach relies essentially on a process of “ontological politics”. It means that I develop a reflection of how assorted practices are performed by Body Hactivists. This line of thinking reconceptualizes “body” in terms of assemblages, relations, and practices and distributes agency and knowledge across heterogeneous materials (Latimer, 2009). I would like to be able to go further in the body hactivist’s descriptions in order to be able to give readers a deeper sense of how this phenomenon is lived and performed, and to demonstrate how the actors engage in “world-building”. I would like to present the ways in which body hactivists articulate their body modification practices in their speech; by developing this line of enquiry further, I would be able to see the very nature of worlds that are being built.

This phenomenon has some paradoxes and complex forms of relationality. Within this idea of relational extension, the body can be re-theorized in terms of relations and practices as these are elicited from moment to moment, in the discourses handled by the actors. Their discourses do not cohere in a simple definition of what the body is. These bodies have “knowledges” which are strictly limited and dependent on their own world constantly under construction, and there is more than one world just as there is more than one body. Beyond that, the body has a possibility of being-in-the-world, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, but is also a possible medium for shifting worlds (Latimer, 2009).

There are many things going on in the narratives and happenings that the interviewees shared, including the performance of various subject’s logic. But I want to go in a direction that considers the way in which this talk constitutes the “body”. I have tried to present here some actors whose postures *vis-à-vis* external technological components—or interacting ones—seem particularly meaningful to the performed body. Evolution, modification, mutation, nature, technology, power, and will—these are terms constantly called into existence and performance by body hactivists. By looking

more closely at Haraway's (1992) concept of "bodily production," I find that organisms are biological embodiments that emerge from a discursive process. It means that these organisms, body and nature, are both fiction and fact, "If organisms are natural objects, it is crucial to remember that organisms are not born. They are made in world-changing technoscientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places" (Haraway, 1992, p.297). And on building scientific discourses and natural scientific objects, humans and non-human forces combined play an effective and active role through their *agencement*.

Our concern figures around the articulations necessary to be involved in "world-making" and "world-shifting". By articulations, taking it from Latour and Haraway's terminology, I mean "to signify. It is to put things together, scary things, risky things, contingent things" (Haraway, 1992, p.324). Articulations proliferate in body hacktivists' discourses and practices, and register differences and contrasts about the body, humanity, and evolution. Our object of study has the occasion to count its own questioning through the use of its own categories. Body hacktivists are connected in various ways and articulate the body, their speech, and practices in diverse forms. As very reflective thinkers, they create distinctions and make rational knowledge claims on special issues such as the body, nature, modification, reality, behavior, activism, and power.

There are many things going on in the narratives and happenings that people shared in the interviews, including the performance of the various subject's logic briefly discussed in this paper. The body and the modifications are being enacted in practices and discourses in different ways, for practices, actors and modifications are many. Body and modifications come in different versions and perspectives for the actors. Their discourse can be sometimes political, social, scientific, or personal, and somehow they hang together (Mol, 2002), for everybody is telling stories about Body Hactivism and their bodily experiences that create particular worlds.

In conclusion, by recognizing the great variety of possibilities in which bodies are reflected and narrated, I still find it necessary to think of the associations among the body and various possible body worlds. Body Hactivism at least shows us their relations desiring to transform and redefine humanity, and to do so, many other concepts often taken for granted also must be reconsidered.

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