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PASSIM &
Makapan Valley

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Master of Fine Arts thesis project,

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ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

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1. PASSIM

(here and there, Latin)

The brief span of an individual life is misleading. Each one of us is as old as the entire biological kingdom, and our bloodstreams are tributaries of the great sea of its total memory. The uterine odyssey of the growing foetus recapitulates the entire evolutionary past, and its central nervous system is a coded time scale, each nexus of neurones and each spinal level marking a symbolic station, a unit of neuronic time.[1]

J.G. Ballard The Drowned World

The Drowned World is a book by J.G. Ballard in which time seems to have done a trick on nature and turned back towards the Jurassic era, leading to a radically warming climate and jungle-like flora sprouting up everywhere. In this Drowned World the humans still inhabiting it are driven to escape into a diminishing habitat in the Northern Hemisphere. It is a strange world, but stranger still, it's not really a world, but rather something creeping on the skins of and within the humans embedded in it, leaving psychological effects from prehistory on their conscious. It seems like a work of fiction

1 Ballard 1983, 45

concerned with ideas more commonly found in object oriented ontology.

PASSIM, as well, is a story of a subject immersed in an environment (though I will soon explain why it's not really an environment, at least not JUST an environment), this one just happens to be an environment of fanvideos, Russian fails, music videos, sports events and beheadings: YouTube. It is a virtual environment, but it acts like a hyperobject from Timothy Morton's theory. These hyperobjects according to Morton are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans"[2] and, as he describes them, have some very special features I will elaborate on one by one in relation to YouTube. I will then go more deeply into what this means to the protagonist of the story, and moreover, what it is to exist with and within these hyperobjects.

Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a brand of philosophy that, to simplify things, proposes to humble the anthropocentric view of positing human existence above nonhuman, and conversely suggests an equal existence for all. In this brand of thought, hyperobjects - borrowing from Timothy Morton - are then objects in themselves, but also so spread both in space and time that they can only be detected as effects in other objects, or local manifestations of themselves, but never as the whole hyperobject itself. This means these objects are always nonlocal, but also viscous, sticking to those who interact with them; temporally undulating; phas-

2 Morton, 2013, 1

ing and interobjective.

"All objects are caught in the sticky goo of viscosity, because they never ontologically exhaust one another even when they smack headlong into one another."[3] Hyperobjects seem to be viscous in sense of unshakeable nearness. They "haunt my social and psychic space with an always-already"[4] meaning there is no going back after their detection, but rather just a realization of them having always been there. Once I've acknowledged the existence of the hyperobject, it is already all around and in me.

As I enter YouTube today on my browser, it presents to me a portrait of myself: videos seen or perhaps left unfinished, subscriptions and what I'd most likely want to see next. Moreover, it already exists in my consciousness as well, as knowledge of - for example - its categories, functions and types of videos born only with it. It, as an object, seems to be all over my Internet behavior, but just as well, it seems to exist always-already in my choices and actions as awareness of its existence and effect on me. Just a bit over ten years after its creation I can no longer think video without it, nor can I really imagine my "social space" without it anymore either.

Timothy Morton writes of quantum level true nonlocality: entangled particles have been shown to be able to influence each other at arbitrary distances that seem to defy the con-

3 Ibid, 36
4 Ibid, 29

stant that is the speed of light. Since speed of light is seen unbreakable, it would seem that "reality just is nonlocal"[5]. This kind of true nonlocality doesn't necessarily apply to all hyperobjects (any more than it applies to everything), and YouTube in this sense isn't truly nonlocal. Yet the way it affects me and the world always from a distance and never as a whole-thing is nonlocality in action.

With some detective work, I could maybe work out the locations of the Google datacenters providing the very physical base for the existence of YouTube, such as the old papermill in Hamina, Finland. However, none of these locations would really give me the answer to YouTubes actual location. It would be impossible to accurately map all the locations from where the 400 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute are coming from, and even if it would somehow be conceivable to do this, and to locate all of its users at this current moment, I still couldn't pinpoint the exact location of YouTube, not even for that passing moment. Similarly I cannot locate YouTube just to its address on my browser either, because the Internet has bubbled over to the offline, as Hito Steyerl suggests in her *Too Much World: Is The Internet Dead* on e-flux. According to her "the internet persists offline as a mode of life, surveillance, production, and organization"[6], and really, YouTube has viscously integrated itself on me and on the offline world so that its existence is now definitely nonlocal.

5 Ibid, 42
6 Steyerl, 2013

“Hyperobjects are time-stretched to such a vast extent that they become almost impossible to hold in mind.”[7] A third quality characteristic of hyperobjects is that they are temporally undulating. Again, Morton uses relativity theory to show how time shouldn’t really be conceived as “as container in which objects float”[8], but instead rather “an emission of objects themselves”[9]. “Hyperobjects seem to beckon us further into themselves, making us realize that we’re already lost inside them”[10]. So “the ocean of floating temporality and spatiality wafts to and fro, “in front of things”: not spatially in front, but ontologically in front”[11], practically meaning that hyperobjects sucker me in: as I type youtube.com on my web browsers address bar, I soon find myself inside the space-time of this video-broadcasting complex.

Yet “hyperobjects are not forever. What they offer instead is very large finitude.”[12] Infinity, as Morton writes, is more manageable, since it is imaginable and thus “brings to mind our cognitive powers”[13], but what YouTube offers is approximately 80 000 hours of video uploaded to its servers on a daily basis. Should one want to stream all of YouTube linearly, one video at a time, even if all uploads were to stop right

7 Morton, 2013, 58
8 Ibid, 67
9 Ibid, 67
10 Ibid, 55
11Ibid, 56-57
12 Ibid, 60
13 Ibid, 60

at this moment, one would have to wait around about 30 000 years to finish[14]. Going back about as many years in history you would find the first examples of figurative art; even the Warner Bros blockbuster from 2008 by the same name dares only look back to 10,000 BC.

What really causes this temporal undulation and hyperobjects' nonlocality is that they "occupy a high-dimensional phase space that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis."[15] "A phase space is the set of all the possible states of a system." [16]This is the reason I only ever detect YouTube when ordinarily engaging with it on my laptop.

Finally, hyperobjects are interobjective - or rather all things are "interconnected in an interobjective system"[17] that Morton calls "the mesh". In a 2014 talk by Daniel van der Velden of Metahaven, he speaks of possession; possession of us. He claims that the age of the Internet is an age of "massive emotional changes that this structure brings about in people."[18] The Internet, or its interfaces, make us, as van der Velden says, more dependent on, or addicted, to each other by means of the way these interfaces are built. I will not go into whether this is good or bad here (and it can be both), but the intersubjectivity this suggests, borrowing from Morton,

14 Turek, 2015
15 Morton, 2013, 70
16 Ibid, 71
17 Ibid, 83
18 van der Velden, 2014, 18.35-18.41

is rather just a "local, anthropocentric instance of a much more widespread phenomenon, namely interobjectivity."[19]

What the hyperobjects do - YouTube, among others - is that they wholly dismiss the concept of the World as an environment or a container. They end the world, because "World as the background of events is an objectification of a hyperobject"[20] and the kind of closeness the hyperobjects bring eliminates the distance a world suggests replacing it with a new kind of intimacy. PASSIM's protagonist starts off with the arrogance of a person encountering a thing, something he conceives exists for him, as a platform to project himself onto. He comes to this intersubjective platform and sees it as a canal for his own creativity. Bit by bit, though, his standpoint changes, as he comes across signs of a very different existence for YouTube in form of quite physical evidence, such as when the seemingly Japanese anime fan cult for the Russian prosecutor at Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaya, turns out to be, by big part, propaganda ordered from a Vietnamese DeviantArt artist[21]. These marks of YouTube on the physical and political landscapes of his world give him first glimpses of YouTube as the hyperobject that it is, giving him humility in this newfound relation that first shows as shock, anxiety and a feeling of belittlement.

Hyperobjects seem to make us weak and small, but what the

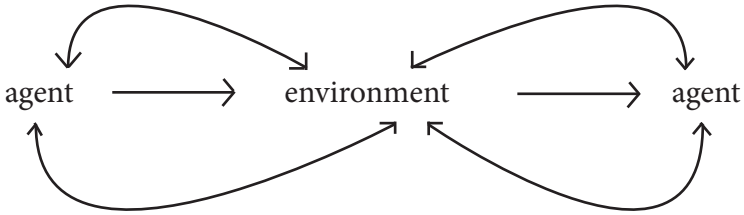
19 Morton, 2013, 81
20 Ibid, 100
21 Metahaven, 2015, 156-160

view they offer really gives “is not a faceless, dehumanized abstraction, but a radical encounter with intimacy. -- Hyperobjects force us into an intimacy with our own death --, with others --, and with the future”[22]. Just as I, or the protagonist of PASSIM, find myself in this “shifting set of zones emitted by specific objects”[23] instead of the world I had gotten used to, I also find myself much more in contact with everything, which leads to a whole new base for broader ethics in this intimacy.

In thinking of how interaction with this newfound closeness of the hyperobjects - of YouTube - functions, it is useful to think of stigmergy. Put simply, stigmergy “is the phenomenon of indirect communication mediated by modifications of the environment”[24] as Leslie Marsh and Christian Onof write in *Stigmergic epistemology, stigmergic cognition*. The term originates from 1950’s and was originally used to explain the so-called ‘hive mind’ behavior in ants. In stigmergy, agents, none of whom have “global knowledge”, act upon a common environment in the “cybernetic relationship of agent -> environment -> agent -> environment through ongoing and mutual modification or conditioning”[25]. Most notions about stigmergy seem to be conceived just this way, with the environment, even when it is recognized as the passer of a message, being seen as a passive part of the equation, where it

22 Morton, 2013, 139
23 Ibid, 141
24 Marsh & Olof, 2007, 1
25 Ibid, 3

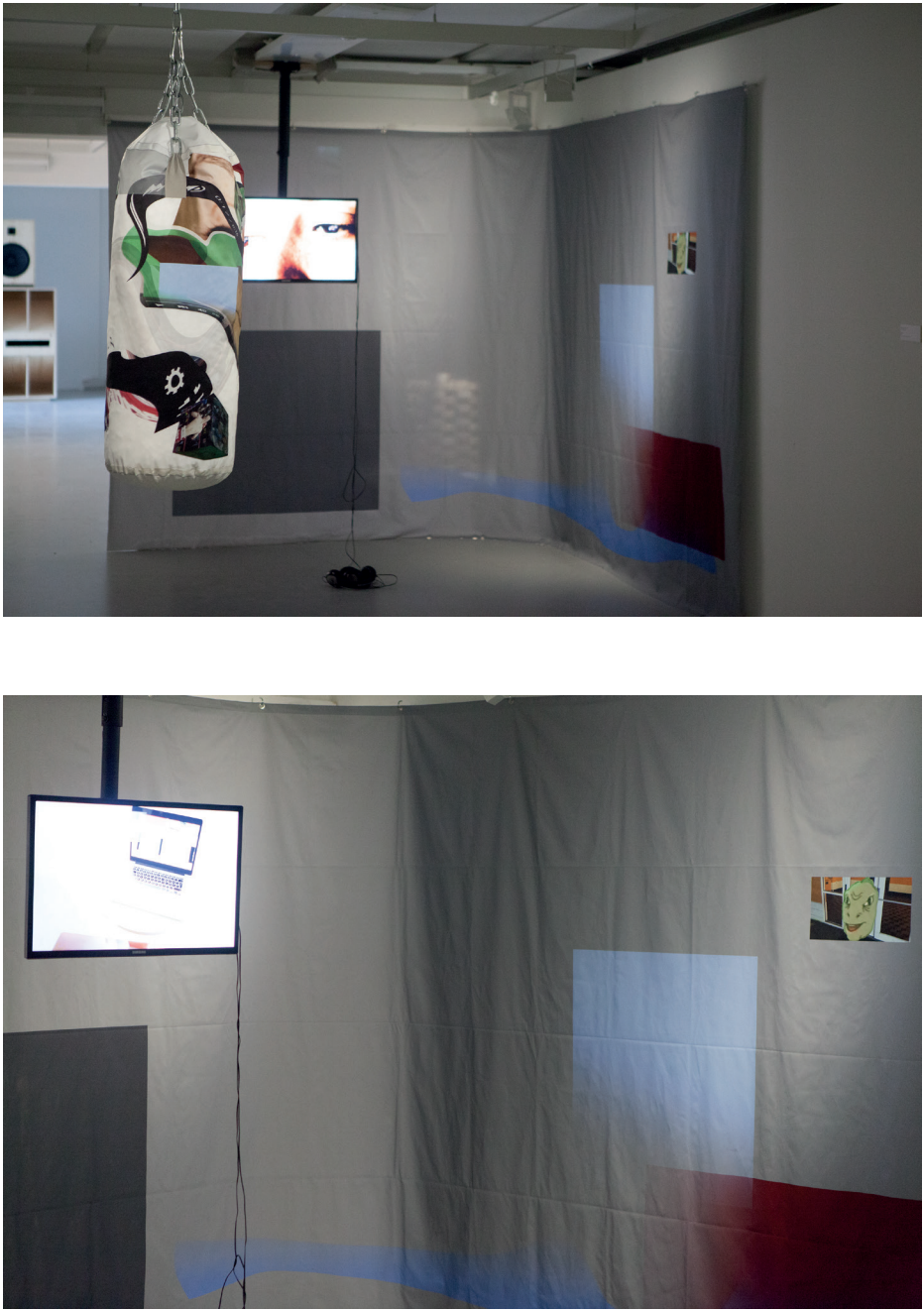
could be practically totally dismissed if it were not to just differentiate between straight face-to-face communication. With hyperobjects, though, the environment can't be seen as just that, but should be taken as an active operator like the agents. Actually, as it has been argued, it probably should not be thought of as an environment (a world) at all. Surely, not at least when thinking of PASSIM's protagonist and YouTube, as YouTube throws itself onto him just as he throws himself on YouTube in a stigmergic symbiosis.



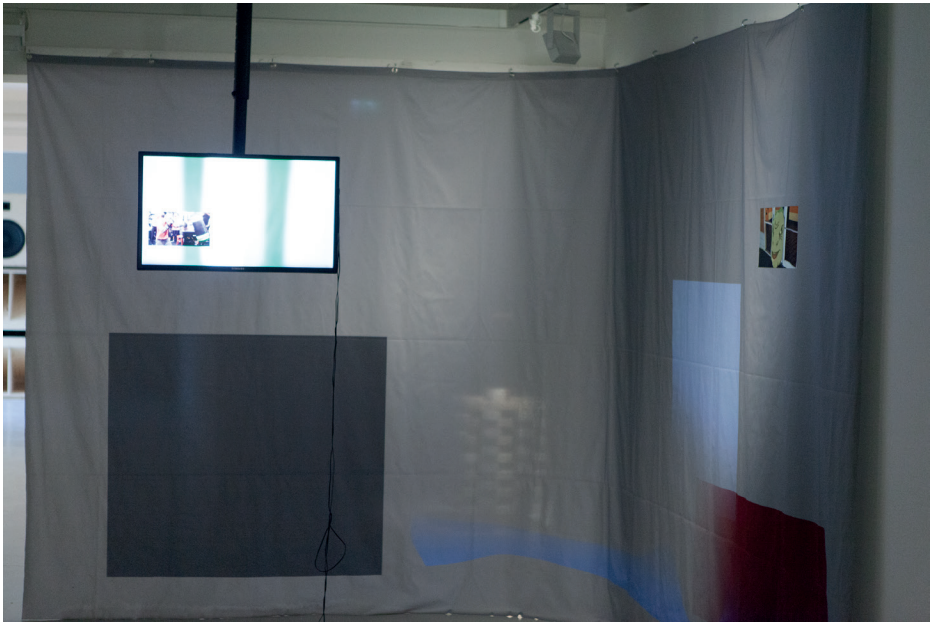
To broaden up on stigmergy, taking the concept to the human world, our cognitive capabilities can be wholly understood to be more or less stigmergic. "Each individual contributes to the evolution of collective knowledge, which in turn impacts upon the individual"[26], and with all of this human intelligence transpiring through the environment, the closeness of the hyperobjects, YouTube, and other objects like it are really quite inseparable from our cognitions. Stigmergic theory actually seems so similar to hyperobjects that those,

26 Ibid, 9

too, are quite inseparable: they both have an “environmental emphasis”, which brings things like YouTube so close that I must accept them *with* me rather than *for* me.

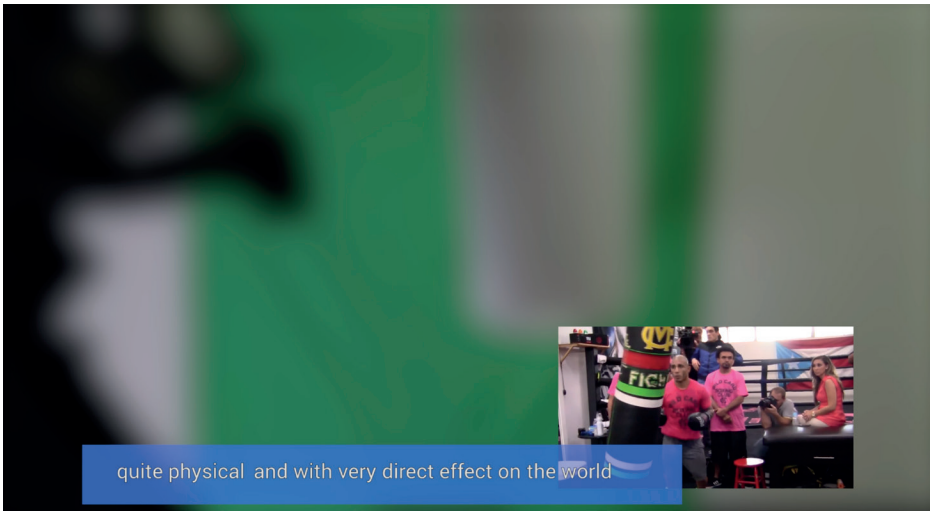


Documentation of the installation in Kuvan Kevät 2016, Exhibition Laboratory



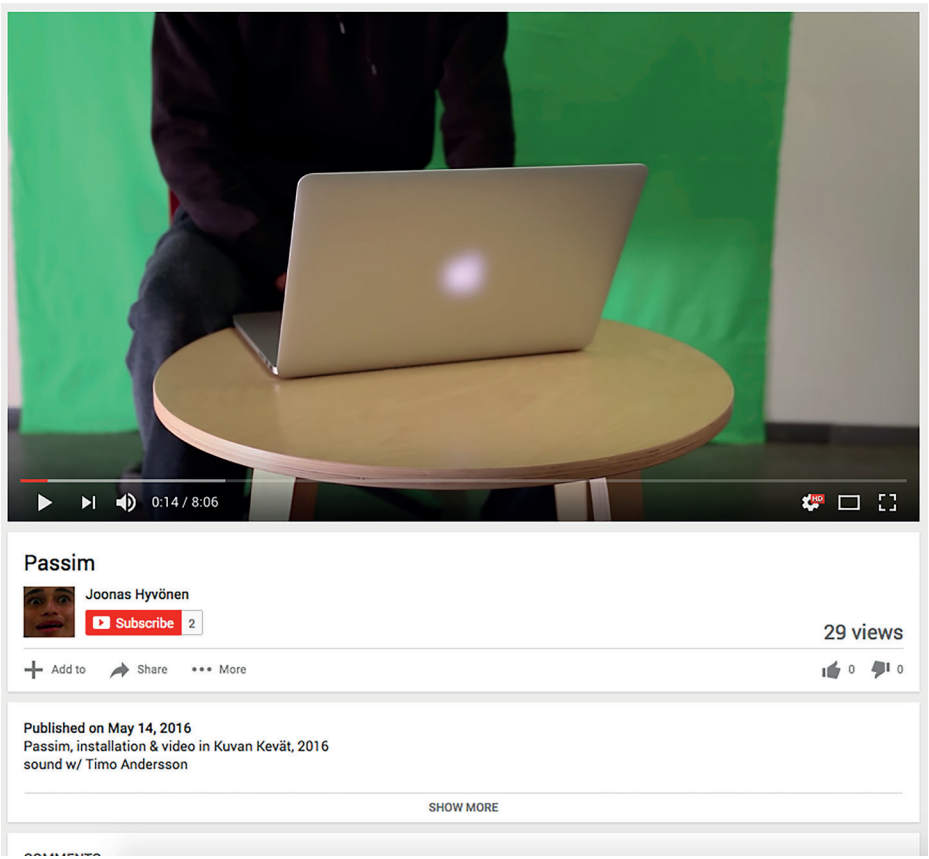
Documentation of the installation in Kuvan Kevät 2016, Exhibition Laboratory

Designs for the digital prints (printed on Decotex)



Screenshots of the video

Screenshots of the video



PASSIM on YouTube, 5.9.2016

2.MAKAPAN VALLEY

Makapansgat pebble is a red jasperite cobble excavated from the Makapansgat cave in the larger archeological site of Makapan Valley in the Northern Province of South Africa. Through natural formation and shaping, mostly by streams of water, it has come to have a distinguishing resemblance to a human face. It would then seem to have been picked up from where it had ended, and carried into the cave in Makapan Valley by Australopithecus africanus for a distance of several kilometres at least. There it remained among remains of Australopithecus and other species until being excavated in 1925 by W. I. Eitzman in 1925[1].

The remarkable distance the pebble was carried, and the fact of being left at a place of dwelling, both give reason to assume, even when it's impossible to know for sure the cognitive capabilities of Australopithecus africanus, that the faces in the chippings of the stone were recognized and given value by the Australopithecus. This would make the pebble, at least according to our current knowledge, the first example of aesthetic recognition and symbolic thinking in the human evolutionary line (much predating the *10.000 BC*). It might have been a mirror-like moment of recognition straight out of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a 1968 film by Stanley Kubrick, though there is almost something more striking in the pebble's blank stare than in the film's monoliths. Quite interestingly, when Raymond Dart first described the pebble in 1974 (6 years after the Kubrick film), he assumed the face the Australopithecus would have recognized must have

1 Bednarik, 1998, 4-7

been upside down from what we would now take it to be, as this face has too much of a resemblance to the face of a current homo sapiens[2]. But the supposed upside-down face bears a weird resemblance to something very contemporary as well: the emoji.

In the times of the emoji, we don't pick up cobbles from rivers quite so often anymore, but something similar to that might exist. I do not mean to mystify technological chainf of production any further (they can be quite obscure), but there is something in the way biomonitoring devices, such as activity trackers, reach the market that resembles the "fluvial transport" of the pebble into the hands of Australopithecus. My meeting with this type of hardware (in the aisles of electronics stores) of somewhat unknown origin, yet reflecting myself, seems a lot like the Australopithecus' run in with the Makapansgat pebble.

"The design of personal health informatics devices is grounded on the belief that such systems can, through the collection and presentation of personal information, promote individuals' self-awareness and that improved self-awareness consequently leads to self-insight, self-control and positive, healthy behavioral change"[3] as Jaana Parviainen writes in her *Quantified Bodies in checking loop: Analyzing the choreographies of biomonitoring and generating big data*. "Also known

2 Ibid, 7
3 Parviainen, 2016, 57

as self-tracking, self-quantification, or the quantified self"[4] biomonitoring is the moniker for the action of gathering quantifiable data of the self and using it for self-improvement.

Thus biomonitoring devices, specifically activity trackers, but most of the so-called smartphones as well, are active body- and behavior-shaping objects. Parviainen uses the term embodied practices in describing a choreographic theory on "how bodies develop new habits and routines to blend in with the function of technologies."[5] Her main concern is the so-called "checking loop" that mobile phones and wearable media (and software like YouTube) force on the user as a "microlevel choreography" that then leads the users to ignore their "their feelings and sensations on body topography and other people within their kinesphere"[6]. She argues that "embodied agency and free will become increasingly mediated by algorithms in a manner where actions are no longer intentional"[7]. Self-collected data of wearable technology is usually seen as neutral and associated with health, but does neutrality actually exist in these data mining and analyzing algorithms, and to what extent, as it is clear that they will feed (and loop) a certain behavior, be it whatever - checking loops, drinking intervals or just running and running.

4 Ibid, 57
5 Ibid, 62
6 Ibid, 65
7 Ibid, 66

Josh Scannell asks the same question in his text, *What can an algorithm do?,* in the DIS *Big Data –issue*. It is not a technical question, as he says, because "an algorithm is a series of instructions; asking what one "can do" in any general sense is rank absurdity"[8]. So *what an algorithm can do?* should be seen as a political and aesthetic question, rather than a technical one. "I consider the algorithm as a political object, as an assemblage of forces that imprints itself on the social as something like "algorithmic governance." Intrinsic to the design of an "algorthim" are decisions that, when routed through the technocratic administration of computation, transform from ideological commitments into material accounting." "Clearly, then, when speaking of "the algorithm," we are not speaking of algorithms per se, but rather of a shift in governmentality catalyzed by data analytics technologies." So, to put it in other words: an algorithm can be or do almost anything, and just technologically speaking, it can not truly be defined in terms of its operational abilities (much more than whether the calculus works or not). Instead, what should be looked at is the administrational decisions preceding the algorithm. There are several reasons for this, but most importantly "the "algorithms" are material and real social processes" and secondly "at the same time that "the algorithm" actively mobilizes concrete social relations, it occludes these relations by reformatting what qualifies as the social. In its technocratic utopianism, data analytics systems render multidimensional processes

8 Scannell, 2015 (all following quotations from ibid until mentioned otherwise)

into numbers subject to mining, dependent upon a logic of smoothness in order to function."

Scannell uses Microsoft's Domain Awareness System, a "crime prediction platform" built for NYPD, in operation since 2012, but the same reasoning can be applied to how algorithms function in biomonitoring. He writes:" predictive crime software has nothing to do with preventing crime. Instead, it simultaneously treats public order clinically, in the vein of disease prevention or weather prediction (whose algorithms form the basis of much of today's crime prediction software) and legitimates plantation neoliberalism and heterosexist ideology as the base-line measurement of what a city should be." And "when we consider the overall calculus of what constitutes "crime," however, the overwhelming majority of criminal acts are the sorts of property and quality-of-life violations that are essentially at the definitional discretion of the police officer to produce. In other words, crime does not exist without the police." DAS is built and marketed as "predictive crime software", but it only really enhances prejudices already built in the system. The trouble is that it makes enforcing dominant ideologies on the population more invisible by camouflaging them in seemingly neutral number crunching, which stands in contrast to, for example, the much more blatant Broken Windows policy.

When it comes to the algorithmic performance in digital biomonitoring devices, the same rules apply. It's an industry where "companies and governments often promote the il-

lusion that algorithmic processes and data-driven systems have been purged of human bias, errors and interference, leading to more neutral, objective and automated decisions."[9] "Activity trackers and wearables are seen as powerful self-motivational tools"[10], but rather than neutral health appliances, they are, like hyperobjects, active reality shapers. Parviainen references Bruno Latours actor-network theory in suggesting that bodies "do not just participate in these networks" (of bodies and collections of measuring devices in this case), but are "actively shaped by them, developing new habituation and embodied practices."[11] We are possessed not just by others and by YouTube, but by our trendiest wearables as well.

So how neutral can these reality-forming objects be? They have the same algorithmic functioning base as DAS, meaning that this is, again, a question of ideology and politics, rather than technology. They don't really come to our reach in rivers after thousands of years of corrosion, but are instead made by a huge and constantly growing industry. It is an industry run from start-ups and by Pi Valley and has links or affiliations with transhumanist ideologies. It is an industry which seems to promote healthy choices, but this definition of *health* isn't the neutral, abstract term it sounds like, but rather, based on the (body)ideals dominant in the industry. Similarly to DAS, these ideals are mostly white, hete-

9 Parviainen, 2016, 66
10 Ibid, 67
11 Ibid, 67

ro, cisgender and wealthy. Moreover, even on an individual level, the checking loop is only the smallest - and probably most harmless - of loops the wearables enforce on the user. The wearable technology gives quite simple, but body- and persona-forming, guidance that can quickly turn repetitive, leading to their own ideology realizing loops - and my animations hero runs on forever.

It is almost as in the early cartoon worlds, where most ordinary home appliances and objects of all sorts come to life. In the Japanese animated film *Ghost in the Shell* from 1995, an AI unit showcases signs of a soul. It seems appropriately descriptive to imagine a kind of a spirit habiting the biomonitoring devices as well, a malevolent spirit as such, even if only by accident. Malevolent because it has no other chance, as it is forced to just execute its own algorithmic nature. For the complying user, it means a shrinking experience of the world until the algorithmic ideals are reached.

On a social aspect “when more and more people are involved in the checking loop as part of their everyday microchoreography, it becomes gradually a commonplace behavior that turns into a powerful norm to follow.”[12] The whole paragraph Parviainen has on this move from individual to the social is worth quoting: “For instance, as Thomaz -- suspected, “This emerging type of self-tracking data has become the basis of a participatory health movement where the axis of responsibility in healthcare shifts more towards individuals and

12 Ibid, 68

away from institutions." This implies that people should take a much larger responsibility for their own health -- In this new landscape, self-tracking would become the norm, and people would be responsible for monitoring any symptoms of diabetes or cancer in their physical bodies. These types of reward-and-sanction systems can be developed to sustain the self-governance of individuals. Constructing profiles of individuals and groups in terms of their physical conditions could be used intentionally to diminish a person's range of future options and to allow or disallow a person to act in a certain way."[13] As argued before, this is not just a shift in health politics, but is really about who governs the ideals on our bodies in the social sphere.

Moreover, Julian Assange in Hans Ulrich Obrist's *In conversation with Julian Assange* talks of three different histories: first being knowledge where "its creation is subsidized, and its maintenance is subsidized by an industry or lobby: things like how to build a pump that pumps water--"[14] (second type being knowledge in process of being forgotten, and third knowledge that some actively try to prevent from becoming public). Biomonitoring technology is working in the domains of knowledge usually maintained by the health industry. There's a corollary here to stigmergy as well, a downside of it actually, as Marsh and Onof write:" it is not so much the distributed nature of knowledge that is cause for concern, but the stigmergic aspect of enabling technologies that has

13 Ibid, 68
14 Obrist, 2011

corroded traditional notions of intellectual authority."[15] They write of "expert opinion" facing "a barrage of skepticism" on the Internet, but the self-tracking culture has the risk of doing the same on health values.

Hito Steyrl has an article *A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition* (e-flux journal #72) that uses apophenia, "the perception of patterns within random data"[16] (more commonly known as the human tendency to see faces or other forms in "noise"), to describe the algorithmic withdrawal of data patterns from sources, be it surveillance images or data gathered by wearables. The thing with apophenia is, it is often equals to overinterpretation of the source, as "projections" really, like Steyerl writes. Wearable technology, in practice, gives projections of its programming as well, projections of the governing ideals on how their users' bodies should be and act.

Makapan Valley reimagines the finding place of the Makapansgat Pebble filled instead with clean white high-rises forming a gated community and the former archaeological caves repurposed as datacenters humming away with rows of server racks making up the backbone of this community tied together by self-tracking. It imagines a community formed by strong algorithmic biases on perfect bodies becoming the social norm that has everyone living the same experienced world of the wearable technology.

15 Marsh & Olof, 2007, 5
16 Steyerl, 2016

"While today statisticians and other experts routinely acknowledge that their findings are mostly probabilistic projections, policymakers of all sorts conveniently ignore this message. In practice you become coextensive with the data-constellation you project. Social scores of all different kinds—credit scores, academic scores, threat scores—as well as commercial and military pattern-of-life observations impact the real lives of real people, both reformatting and radicalizing social hierarchies by ranking, filtering, and classifying."[17] The Makapan Valley community's obsession with biomonitoring tech is a problem with the policymaking that fails to recognize the projecting nature of the technology, leading to a society with strict formats on proper, or permitted, living.

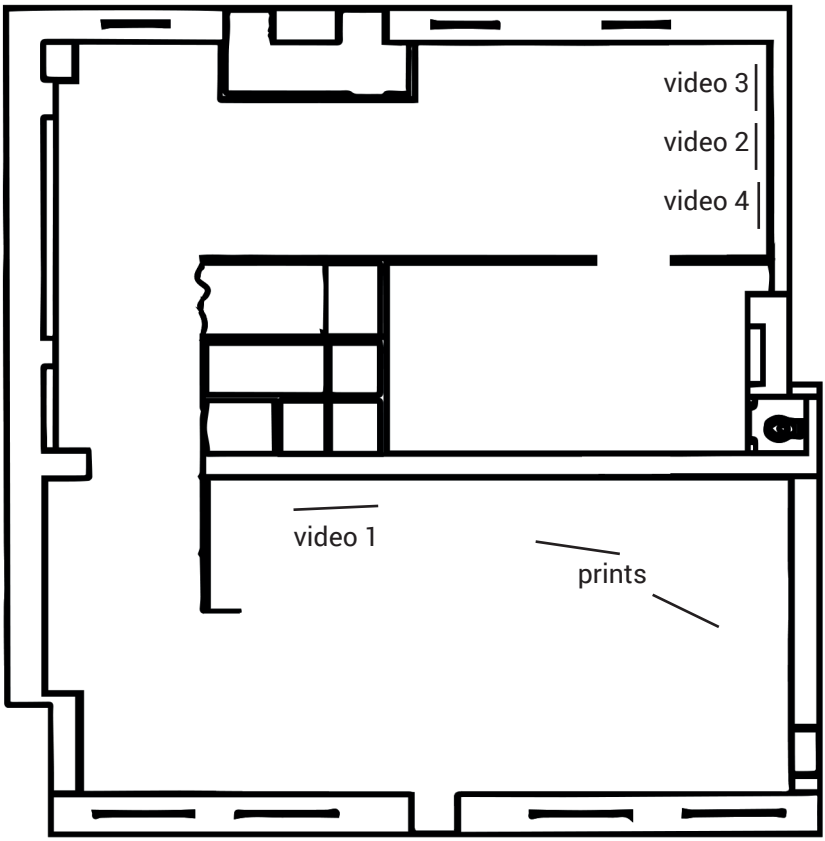
It is a form of "solutionism", as Metahaven writes. "Solutionism takes problems from social and political domains and recalibrates them as issues to be dealt with by technology alone."[18] This solutionism easily "hijacks", for example, health policies by making them seem like equations solvable by technology. Yet, as it has been shown, the technology doesn't precede politics, but is rather immersed in it, and to avoid this kind of thinking, political choices and awareness are necessary. On a user level "once one accepts that the patterns derived from machinic sensing are not the same as reality, information definitely becomes available with a

17 Ibid
18 Metahaven, 2013

certain degree of veracity."[19] Biomonitoring tech can truly be transformative and a strong motivational tool - and is also bringing about innovations that positively move forward health industry - but both on individual and social
level, it has monster-like tendencies that creep up unwanted changes, which require a very conscious usage.

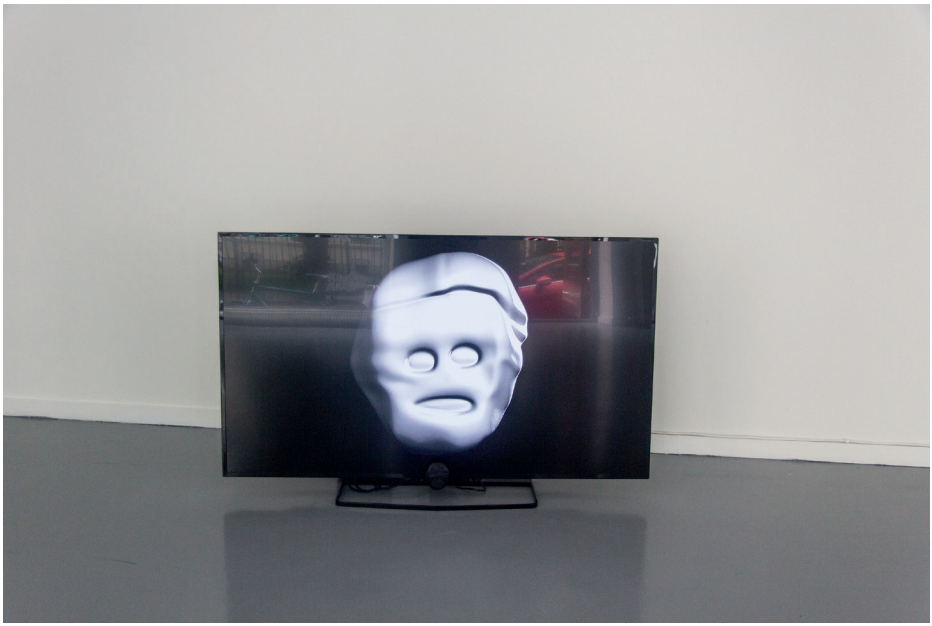
19 Steyerl, 2016

Makapan Valley in Exhibition Laboratory Project Room



Video 1 on 50″ 4k screen
Videos 2, 3 & 4 on three separate 40″ screens
Two digital prints on Decotex

Documentation of Makapan Valley's installment in Exhibition Laboratory Project Room



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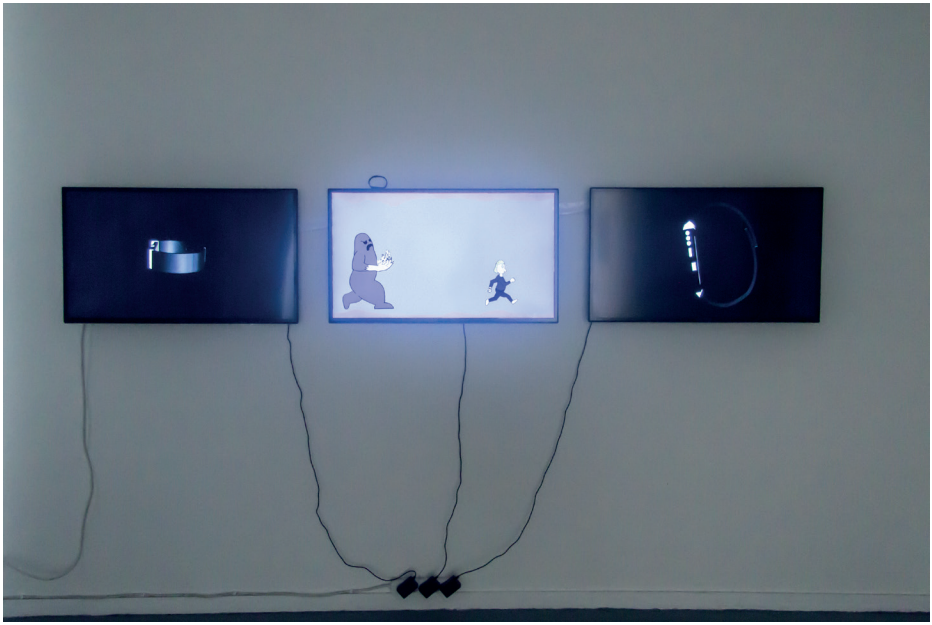

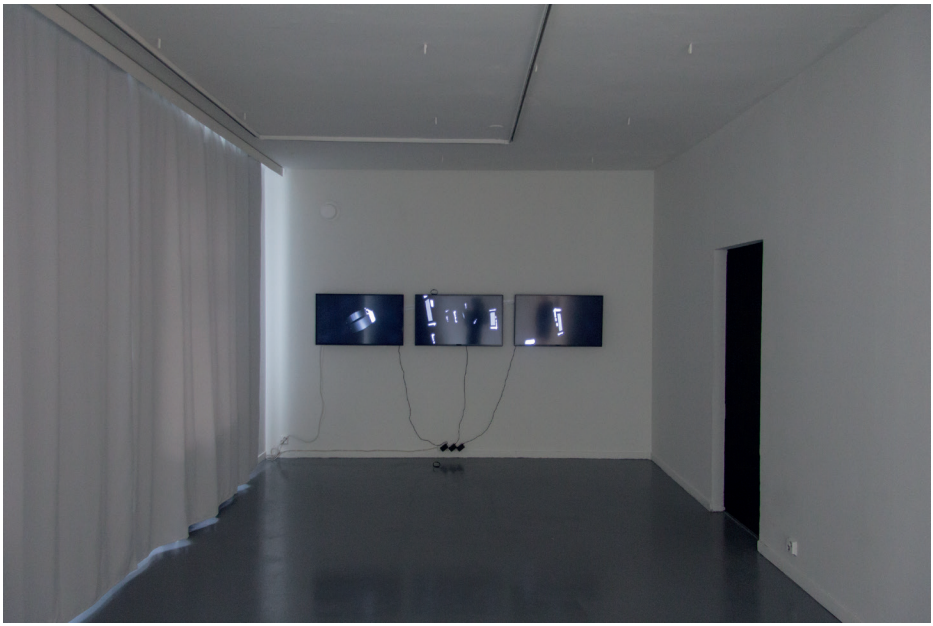

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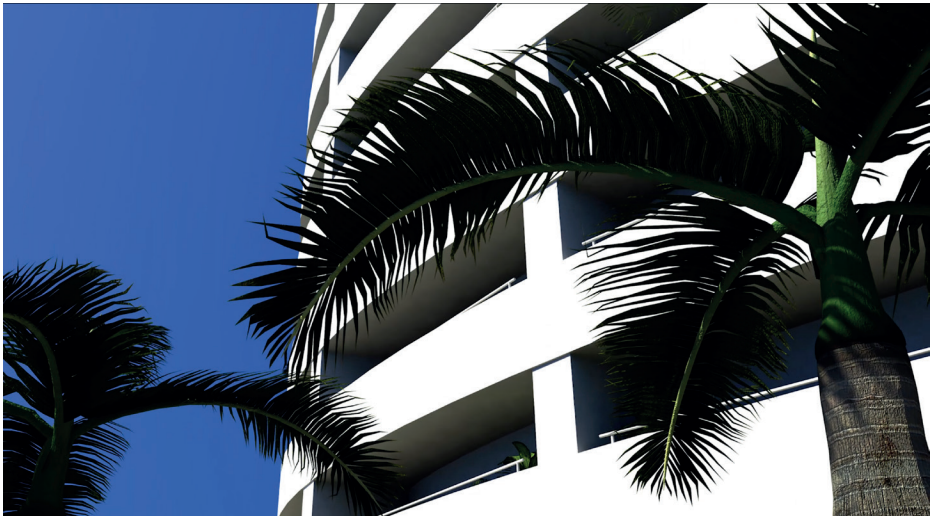
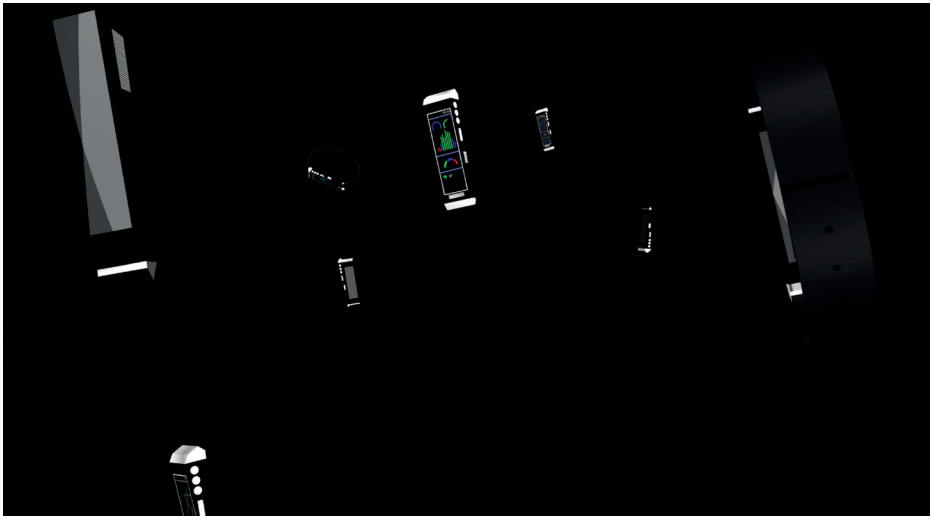
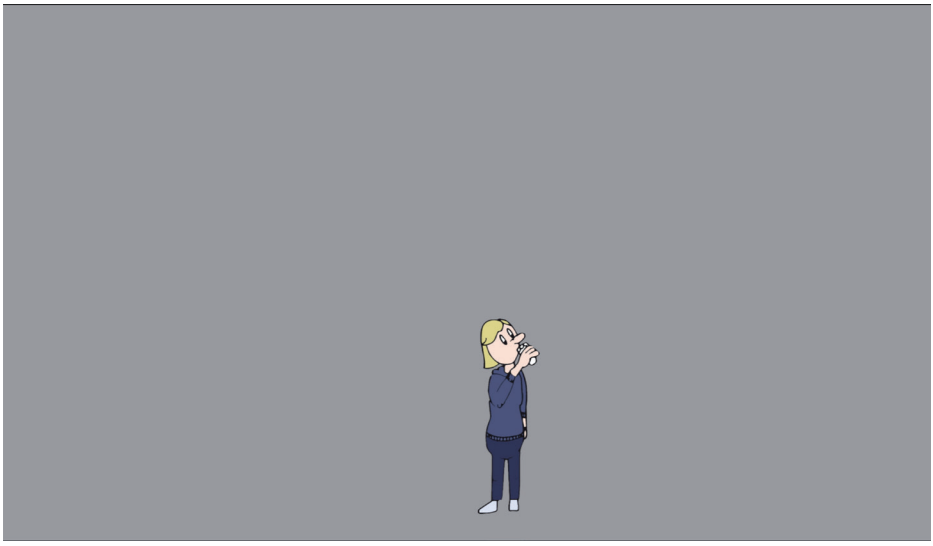


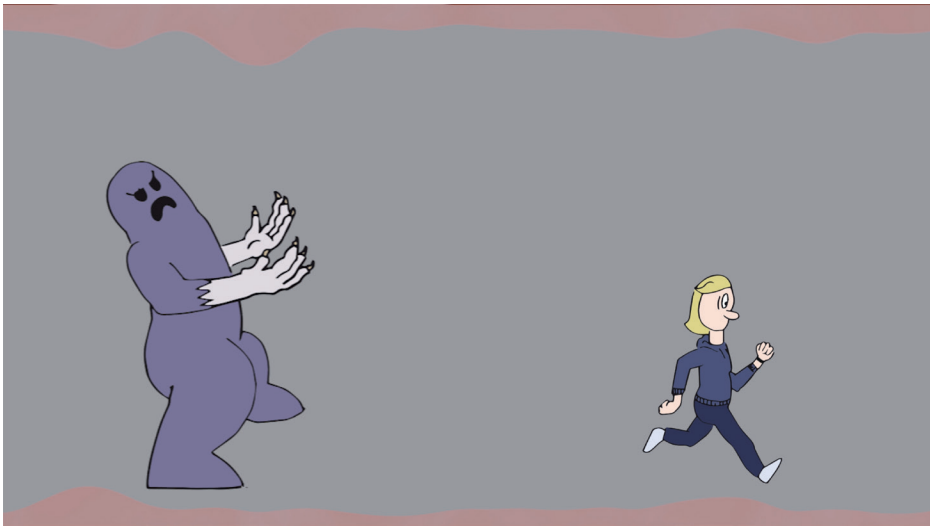
Screenshots of video 1

Screenshots of video 1

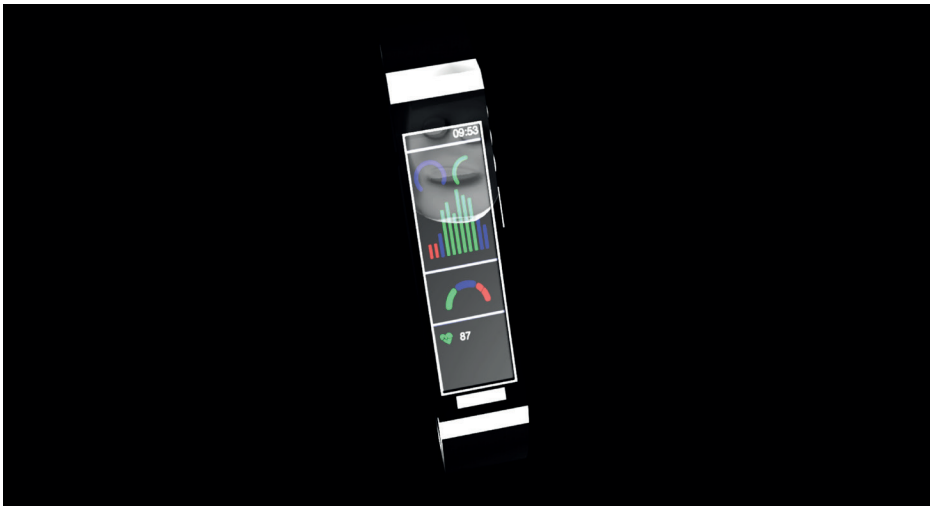




Screenshots of video 2



Screenshots of video 2



Screenshots of videos 3 & 4

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