



take care,

June 9-July 20, 2018

Artists:

Hayley Barker, Darya
Diamond, Ian James, Young
Joon Kwak, C. Lavender,
Sarah Manuwal, Saewon
Oh, Amanda Vincelli, and
SoftCells presents: Jules
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Sun-ha Hong is currently a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities at MIT. His forthcoming book on NYU Press Fabrications: Knowledge and Uncertainty in a Data-Driven Society investigates the parameters for “knowledge” with the rise of big data and ubiquitous surveillance, particularly as it relates to the body. We conducted this interview over email in May 2018.

Your work considers, on a very basic level, the epistemic relationship between big data and human subjects. You’ve researched self-tracking technologies and the Quantified Self communities in order to unpack the assumptions regarding the truth telling capacities of such inventions. Not only does your research reveal, on a larger level, a deeply held faith in the objectivity of data, and its social cultivation, you also touch on the ethos of personal empowerment derived from self-tracking. Given that this exhibition explores the concept of “self-care” I’d like to begin by asking you about the relationship between these tools and a sense of self-empowerment, particularly related to your fieldwork in lifelogging. Where does this feeling of individual empowerment come from? What beliefs underpin them?

The first thing I’ll say is that the two things, objectivity and individual empowerment, are deeply connected. Our newest technologies, our newest concoctions for health and happiness, extend our long flirtation with the Enlightenment. Not just its quest for objective truth and the rule of reason, but this idea that we can find the truth ourselves, and that this truth has a practical, actionable quality that lets us make our own decisions. There’s a particular kind of politics embedded in this vision of empowerment, which says that you can do and know more than you ever could on your own – as long as you enlist the help of technologies not of your making, operating according to their own interests.

You see this in the idea that self-tracking is taking big data, a complicated technology pioneered by and for governments and corporations, and unlocking its potential for ordinary folk – just like computers went from a military-industrial technology to a personal one, routed through mid-century counterculture. You can now purchase a wristband which gives you an electrical shock when you're off-task or engaging in bad habits - a device which was born when the creator experimented with hiring a woman to slap him whenever he wasn't focusing on work. Here you have quite literally the techniques of observation and punishment familiar to prisons, science fiction, or creepy psychology experiments, but purified into a positive tool – because, after all, you do it to yourself.

One of the ways that this idea of empowering individualisation gets endorsed is by threading it to an even longer history. In the self-tracking space, it's common to hear someone quote the old Socratic maxim, 'know thyself'. It's a way to give what is happening now a very old and venerable lineage, one almost as old as Western civilisation. New technologies often piece together their own ancestry in this way, which allows them to piggyback onto this long accumulation of legitimacy. Put this way, the quest to know the self almost sounds like a fundamental human project - which now gets a new breakthrough with the latest technologies. There is a sentimental dimension to our attraction to self-tracking and self-care, which is what allows us to believe in the bigger project even as some of these gadgets disappoint and we're not always sure that they're actually making us any happier or more in control.

Looking more horizontally across contemporary society, and particularly America, there are also important connections between the idea that you have to take care of yourself, and the idea that you can't trust other people to know better. The doctor sees you only once a month for ten minutes, and they're probably incentivised by the industry to recommend expensive treatments you don't actually need – so why not measure your own glucose levels, analyse your stool, image

your colon, and find a solution that's unique to your body? The argument goes that when you give big data to the people, it becomes 'small data'; you're finding not the pill tested on a random sample of women in their 30's, but a pill for *you*, the *n* of 1. So the argument goes, it's the unique, individual you that is the site of really objective truth, and nobody's in a better position than you to come up with whatever unorthodox solution for your chronic fatigue or back pain.

We have to understand what's going on in self-tracking, or practices of self-care, not just in terms of the domains of technology or health or psychology, but the broader shift in how much we respect experts, how much we trust institutions, that we see play out in our electoral politics or the spread of misinformation online. We get the explicitly dangerous side of this individualised fact-making when we see redditors try to crowdsource a terror investigation (and set off witch-hunts on innocents in the process), or when you see the Charleston mass killer Dylann Roof say that he truly radicalised when he googled 'black on white crime', because he was trying to find out the truth himself rather than believe the experts. There's obviously a difference between measuring your sleep levels, and becoming a vaccine skeptic. But these various practices are all coming out of a gradual distrust of a common truth or a common policy. We have to ask not only 'is this really empowering or not', but also 'what is it about our society that makes us feel like we need to empower ourselves in this way?'

In the same way, we have to ask what kind of new labours, new troubles, new responsibilities, new guilts, that these empowering activities bring to our doorstep. From an economic perspective, if you are someone who has to constantly sell one's productivity to the market, the 'empowerment' of self-tracking and self-care becomes a necessary labour for one's survival. The injunction to 'care for yourself' is a truncated version of 'you've got to care for yourself to stay afloat, because nobody will do it for you.' In a society where full-time employment is often a blessing that

may disappear at any moment, and your job category as well, all the training, measuring, managing, that is needed to keep you competitive and productive now has to be arranged between you and your Fitbit, you and your Duolingo, you and that new programming language you're learning in your spare time.

To start untangling these tradeoffs, we might have to go back to the basic questions posed by the Enlightenment, and the basic problem of what really empowers people. Our ideas of what is empowering in a technological, capitalist society is so tightly bound to a very specific and often flattering idea of choice. Did I choose to purchase this washing machine and not the other one? Did I choose to press that button to share my data, instead of someone forcing me to do it at gunpoint? Hence the idea that if you suffocate people with consent forms, you've empowered them to make real decisions about the technological world they live in. (Spam mail used to be about penis enlargements, now they're about cookies and password resets.) Even as we exercise such choices, what kinds of lives are presumed, valorised, and sometimes required of us in a society of self-tracking, self-care, self-optimisation?

Some critics of self-care see the intense emphasis on personal responsibility embedded in its rhetoric as a barrier to understanding greater structural injustice and envisioning a collective response.¹ In order to think through the politics of personal responsibility within this context, I'm curious if you can discuss the role of the individual, and more precisely, individualized agency in your research.

For me, to think about the role of the individual and the limits of their agency, I have to start by asking: what kind of person do I have to become in order to fulfil the expectations of new tracking technologies? Often, it is the expectations of our machines that shape the kinds of humans we become. What we're seeing right now is that

we're starting to redraw some of the conventional thresholds that dictate what is your business and what is for somebody else to worry about, what is your responsibility to fix and what kind of resources, education, skills, money, lifestyle, you need to have to live up to that responsibility.

Specifically with self-tracking technologies, many of these products presume or recommend a certain kind of individual: someone who is tech-savvy, someone for whom it makes economic sense to spend hundreds of dollars and hours optimising their sleep patterns, someone who has the kind of lifestyle that allows them to experiment with new pillow designs and adjust their sleep hours and fill the bedroom with white noise. And all of these secondary requirements, or responsibilities, that come along with the promise of self-tracking are things that the individual has to procure however they can. Meanwhile, beneath the demographic of folks who can afford Fitbits, the less ideal individuals tend to experience tracking technology in different guises – such as Amazon warehouse workers, whose employer just patent wristbands for tracking worker movements down to which container they are reaching for. (Of course, the stated purpose is to help workers retrieve items more efficiently, but we can all see that there are multiple horizons of potential use here.)

These differentiated treatments go back right through (at least) the 20th century. If you go back to the 1970's and the wellness movement, there's a *New York Magazine* centrefold that calls them 'The Physical Elite' – 'They Run. They Work Out. They Think They're Better Than You Are.' These are the forefathers of the contemporary stereotype, that Bay Area tech worker who goes on two-mile runs during lunch hour. And back then, too, we find that these tend to be well educated, high income professionals. What kind of life do you need to have already in order to take advantage of the newest tricks for self-tracking and self-care?

The inequalities between the ideal self-tracker and the rest is clear enough. But it's also a question of what kind of

individualism is cultivated for even the ideal consumer. The key piece of the puzzle here is the *moralisation* of the process. These industries bring us on board through a minefield of guilt trips: why don't you take care of yourself properly? Why do you lack the self-control, to regulate your life in a healthier way? If you fail to prevent sickness or optimise your productivity, isn't it ultimately a failure of the will? The persistent narrative is that if there is a way, there must be a will, and if new techniques for optimising oneself are available, the failure to take advantage of them is a form of negligence.

Once again, we come back to this idea that giving people more options, more tools, more capabilities, does not necessarily result in empowerment or freedom. There is a certain naivety in the idea that something is a 'free choice' just because it is sold in shops rather than foisted on our hands by government officials. I think one of the things that's happening right now is a steep increase in our personal overhead, the kind of unending maintenance work we have to do to remain socially respectable, economically viable, and so on. Even as new technologies promise convenience and efficiency, the amount of baseline work we have to do stay afloat might be increasing as well. A tool extends our agency in the sense that it extends our capabilities for affecting the world. But it also levies new responsibilities on us, another set of demands to answer to.

As you describe, within the capitalist framework as our choices expand, "freedom" expands, and society improves. There's an automatic equation there. I'd like to hear more about the promises of self tracking and its vision for greater social wellbeing. What ideologies for collective health or wellness do they uphold?

This question is related to what we assume to be good, to be beneficial – i.e. "of course more choice is always better, so all we have to do is figure out how to add more choice into the soup." And there's a pretty consistent array of end

goals or ideal virtues that characterise the horizon of self-tracking: health, wellness, productivity, happiness, are probably the most frequently recurring keywords.

These are dangerous words. Happiness most of all: it carries a kind of moral force that is very difficult to challenge. Why wouldn't you want to do this, if it makes you happy? Why are you not making yourself happier? What is wrong with you? One of the most violent things you can do is to claim what makes people happy, because then the moral imperative is fixed, and everything else becomes an excuse. Health no longer simply means the absence of debilitating problems, a default state one occupies when one is not sick. Rather, it is a mythical state of a perfectly optimised body; you can quit smoking, you can measure your sleep, etc., but you can never stop, you could always be *healthier*, and you never know what will put you back on the hospital bed. In a sense, this is the ideal opportunity for commercialisation: a business where nobody is ever done buying.

In the self-tracking space, this injunction to indefinite improvement for health and happiness manifests in the unending labours of knowing yourself – and here we come back to the idea that more choice, more freedoms, often ends up increasing your overhead, the maintenance work that you have to do to keep up with your (social) obligation to yourself. Meanwhile, this individualised work is sold not necessarily as a way to oppose yourself to the wider society, to get ahead and leave the chumps behind, but this nice universalising fiction that we are all going to get there, this is where our world is going, this is progress, we're going to extend the Steven Pinker-style narrative where we are all healthier and happier and live longer than we ever have. Notably, prominent evangelisers of tracking, like Kevin Kelly, often use a kind of depersonalised language: it's not Kelly the visionary bringing the tracking future into our world, but that 'something is happening' and they are just documenting its progress. It's a kind of Kafkaean joke: it has been decided that society is going to become data-driven

and we are all going to become self-trackers, though nobody's quite sure who decided anything when.

One of the collective visions you see emerging is this idea that we will go from the Quantified Self, a distributed smattering of canny self-trackers, to the Quantified Us, a world where all this data starts becoming aggregated to discover new population-level truths about ourselves for the benefit of society as a whole. This is one of the reasons that questions of privacy have tended to be sidelined in this debate (though recent events like Cambridge Analytica may shift the focus now); the implicit vision is that yes, you track yourself and optimise yourself and you should own that, but as a technological optimist, as a believer in the greater good, you will probably also want to share some of that data so we can learn more about what makes us happy and healthy on a collective level.

This is why the domains of medicine and healthcare – or as we brand it now, 'eHealth' or 'mHealth' – has been one of the key proving grounds for technologies of self-care. On one hand, it has been a scene of contestation over who has the right to declare the truth about your body; some doctors are very resistant to self-trackers who bring in spreadsheets to their consultation, because now this practice of self-care introduces a different kind of interactional model for how to pass judgment and how you trust that judgment. On the other hand, you also find hospitals seizing this technology for more extensive surveillance of their patients, often involving body-embedded sensors (sometimes as a tattoo!) that measure relevant physiological indicators and report back to the hospital side. Insofar as nobody is ever perfectly healthy (physically or mentally), and insofar as the focus is increasingly on prevention over post-facto treatment (just like in counter-terrorism), what we are seeing here is baby steps towards a comprehensive monitoring of human bodies that ensures that happiness and health isn't just something you report to your teachers, doctors, therapists on a semi-regular basis, but that it is a continuous web of

measurements where you are always checking in on where you stand (and others are checking in too).

There is a certain vision of the collective good for tracking and datafication, if we mean collective good in the sense of measuring, calculating, sorting, governing populations. And one of the key political questions is how the effort to empower people to measure themselves and govern themselves, is going to be contradicted and overruled by these larger scale, institutional adoptions of the same technology. One example here is Fitbit, which is really a poster child of self-tracking's mainstream popularity. Now, Fitbit has started to market itself to companies, something scholars like Erika Pearson have been looking into. Insurance companies like John Hancock in the US, or Sovereign in NZ, are trialling schemes where customers share their Fitbit data for sign-up bonuses. They are very clear that they won't use such data to recalculate your insurance premiums, for example – but that is a horizon of potential use, and an elephant in the room. A recently patented pill, 'Abilify', has a sensor inside, and you can use your phone to track when you've ingested, presumably so you don't forget. And the pill they've chosen to do this on is aripiprazole, prescribed typically for schizophrenic, bipolar and depressive conditions. So, imagine: what would it mean for an underage or senior patient diagnosed with a mental disorder to 'refuse' consent for doctors to access medical information? What is the weight of choice available once such forms of data-sharing become normalised? We are at a moment where what begins under the auspices of individuals that know themselves, starts to expand into new forms of institutional power over the conditions of our social existence.

Amidst all this, what doesn't really get debated so much is what kind of society is a society full of tracking individuals, and whether that society is a happy and healthy society. That's a very different question from, how do we use these technologies to deliver health and happiness, and that difference has everything to do with all these different

dreams, different values, that we pour into these words. And the pitfall here is that we can't simply rely on the virtuous chain of more choice = more freedom, or a blanket endorsement of health and happiness. So I think the most difficult and crucial thing in all this is the moral scaffolding: why, after all, should we 'take care' of ourselves? What kind of people is a people that 'cares for themselves'? And can such care – any care that retains a possibility to carve out a different way of life – survive, if it is executed through a panoply of consumer devices, and that data is poured into standardised systems for comparison, judgment, prevention?

You argue that there's an opportunity to cultivate a relationship with technology that is "open and contingent" and, as such, potentially defiant of objective and progressive strictures. Could you clarify what you mean by "open and contingent"? What would this look like in practice?

The most challenging thing about technology is that it forces us to judge it – and everything else – according to its own terms. Heidegger, of course, warned us exactly this a century ago. When we speak the language of accuracy, efficiency, objectivity, speed, scalability, and so on, the kind of ethical and political solutions we can imagine become technological as well. Criticising Fitbit for not measuring our exercise accurately enough is important, for example, but it is a kind of criticism that already conceals an implicit message – that if the technology was more accurate, more efficient, then there would be no problems whatsoever. For me, this is suffocating: the idea that the good has already been decided, and all that remains is to get there technologically. For starters, there is a desire for openness, for a degree of indeterminacy, at this normative level.

In practical terms, however, it is difficult to visualise what an alternative would look like. After all, our present structures around technology adoption were not designed by any centralised entity, but the result of a longer historical

emergence. Nevertheless, we are, as contemporaries of these technologies, obligated to try. I am trying to ask, how can we judge new techniques of self-tracking and self-care, and ourselves as its users and targets, in ways that are foreign to the standards of the technology itself?

One frame that I am trying to work through is technology as a *relationship*, which I think is a way to have a more open-ended conceptualisation of what technology does. When we think about a new romantic relationship, or a new roommate, or even a new pet, we agonise over the many unpredictable consequences that we know will transform our emotional rhythms, our dreams and ambitions, our perception of ourselves, the limits of our world. We are aware that such relationships bring with them a host of undefinable effects that aren't simply ephemeral, but perhaps constitute the very essence of that relationship. It seems strange that, when we think about subscribing to Facebook, a wearable tracker, a new productivity hack, we adopt an incredibly narrow expectation of their consequences. The result is that when we do recognise how these technologies make us lonely or unhappy, we chalk that up to a failure on the human side: why are you letting yourself be affected in this way? Why can't you just quit the technology? After all, it was your choice! So, how can we start talking about all the consequences of technology that don't appear in specs sheets and trade shows and legal definitions of harm, and talk about them in a way that doesn't marginalise them as the 'side effects'?

The pitfall here is that leaving the meaning of technology 'open and contingent' doesn't necessarily mean a freer relationship. That would be to repeat the fiction that as long as we are given choices, we are exercising agency. I also think this is the lesson that is being played out now through Cambridge Analytica and other scandals. A deregulated Internet certainly presented a breadth of technological possibilities that a tightly centralised system may not have. But as these possibilities are seized by communities, entrepreneurs, corporations, this open expanse crystallises

into relations of data extraction and manipulation that none of them might have foreseen or even desired specifically. With new self-tracking technologies, too, there are concerns that what began as a relatively creative practice of nonjudgmental experimentation is now being scaled up into, ironically, a one-size-fits-all, corporatised business of self-improvement. It is one thing to understand how these technologies could have turned out differently, but it is another to ask, how do you *reopen* those possibilities? How do we take technologies that have already seeped into the background of the world, and pry them loose from the walls? Here, I think, is one of the places where art, through all its own troubles and transformations over the last century, retains a crucial role.

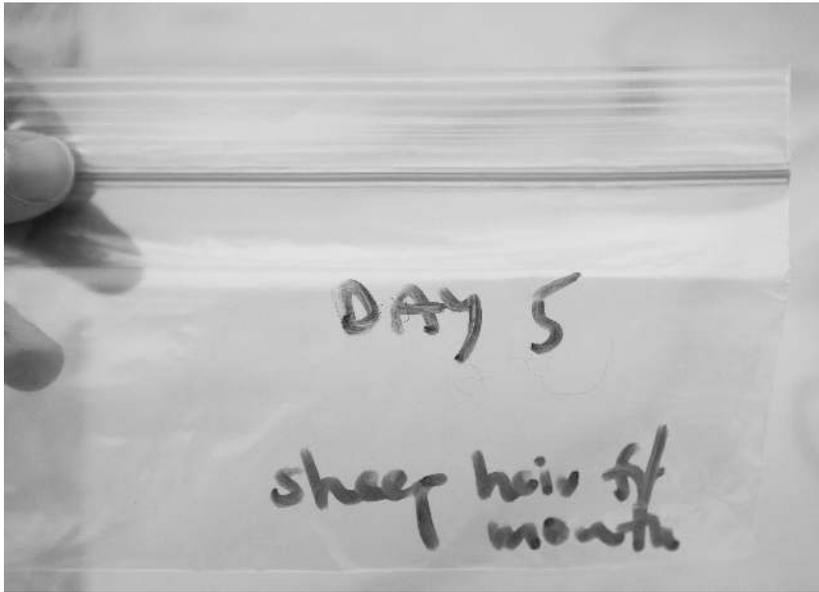
¹ Laurie Penny, "Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless: On Negotiating the False Idols of Neoliberal Self-Care" in *The Baffler* July 8, 2016
<https://thebaffler.com/latest/laurie-penny-self-care>



[This is a text accompanying Jules Gimbrone's *Collapse Score #7*, presented by SoftCells on the occasion of *take care*,]

Collapse Score #7 - External, 2018

Day 1 : Feet touch, Day 2 : In a room for more than 3 hours, Day 3 : A moment that felt uncomfortable, Day 4 : Involves the lips, Day 5 : Something embarrassing done for this, Day 6 : Hard, Day 7 : Had to steal it, Day 8 : While in motion, Day 9 : A part of a large whole, Day 10 : Private, Day 11 : Public, Day 12 : It was so easy it felt like cheating, Day 13 : Soft, Day 14 : It's going to change, Day 15 : Used every day, Day 16 : Used just today, Day 17 : Fuck you Jules, Day 18 : While still, Day 19 : Communicating, Day 20 : Bonus
cut off toe nail painted green, manganese carbonate, clipping from the vest, piece of lip, Goat hair, tissue stained in blood, piece of wall, fly, ADD pill, tissue liner, grass, boxer brief fabric sample, cookie, kiwi, coco butter, clonazepam, clay, flower, blue tape, salt



Day 1 : Feet touch

cut off painted green toe nail (big toe, right foot)

Day 2 : In a room for more than 3 hours

manganese carbonate. An ingredient you use it to make a rough, lava like textured glaze. 6 hours in the studio.

Day 3 : A moment that felt uncomfortable

trying to decide if you should buy a snoopy hugging bird t-shirt at a ventura thrift store. you don't want to be there. you're doing it for Rand, who's trying to be a "good friend." This last week is full of dread, the kind you haven't felt since you were 25. You've exhausted yourself with yourself. at least you pass out at night from this exhaustion. you're trying to play it cool. you text him some love. nothing. the worst thoughts come, way below you. getting wiser, freer, braver is just a temporary state. being in (this kind of) love sucks. you

buy a suede vest that you'll never wear. clipping from the vest

Day 4 : Involves the lips

bottom right side of lip is always chapped. here it is.

Day 5 : Something embarrassing done for this

goat hair from new fully-footed goat pants from russian given to you by him. found in his mouth upon kissing. everything is bliss around here. wtf. how can it be so up and down?

Day 6 : Hard

a tissue you wrapped around your finger when it was bleeding and were in a rush to get out of the house.

Day 7 : Had to steal it

piece of wall and nail from the Sculpture Center, from the spot Jules had their show

Day 8 : While in motion

you caught a fly on the plane, you were writing a love poem and feeling sappy so there's tears on the fly too.

Day 9 : A part of a large whole

broken up ADD pill

Day 10 : Private

tissue liner for examination table at the doctor's office

Day 11 : Public

grass you sat on in front of LaBrea Tar Pits

Day 12 : It was so easy it felt like cheating

fabric sample from a pair of boxers you made him keep in his armpit over several days so you had his smell with you when he wasn't around. you woke up to them right next to your face

Day 13 : Soft

cookie bought for a road trip, left in cabinet for a long time, tried and determined to be old and too soft

Day 14 : It's going to change

Kiwi, still too hard to eat.

Day 15 : Used every day

coco butter, used mostly on your lips and eyes, sometimes you eat it by the spoonful

Day 16 : Used just today

clonazepam

Day 17 : Fuck you Jules

clay squeezed in your palm as hard as you can. can't seem to get shit done today. fuck you, Jules

Day 18 : While still

flower plucked from phillips terrace, listening to ravens fly around.

Day 19 : Communicating

blue tape you use to cover up the computer cam.

Day 20 : Bonus *

last day, salt for your wounds. its been a tough as hell month

