

From *Emilio Vavarella: rs548049170_1_69869_TT*: Identity between
Biological and Digital Codes
by Sabine Himmelsbach

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In his series of works *The Other Shape of Things* (2017–ongoing), the Italian artist Emilio Vavarella examines the different states that objects can have, based on data transmission or translation errors through a variety of techniques and technologies, from 3D scanning and 3D printing to data manipulation. Our relationship to technology and its effects on people and society are constant subjects in Vavarella's artistic practice. In earlier works he addressed how technologies influence and control our behavior, how we communicate with and through machines, how our consumer behavior is controlled by the suggestions of bots, and how our realities are increasingly shaped by the outputs of algorithms and artificial intelligence. Computation has made our world quantifiable. Everything today is based on data. Data permeates all social and economic structures—even when it may not appear so at first glance.

Vavarella's new project *rs548049170_1_69869_TT (The Other Shapes of Me)* (2020) takes up the theme of various states and diverse representations of data sets. For this he made two transfers. The project is based on the genotyping of the artist's DNA, which he carried out using the services of a commercial company. His biological code was translated into a binary code, and he then used a Jacquard loom to convert this data into an analog textile. The textile produced has an impressive length of more than seventy meters, but it would have been much longer if he had not pushed the machine to its absolute limit by compressing the code (and the woven textile) as much as possible—to the maximum display of information that can possibly be handled by a historical Jacquard loom. Here, Vavarella draws on an old technology that is considered a model for the early calculating machine—a mechanical loom that can be programmed by punched cards. From the Jacquard loom onward, we can trace a series of technological developments that led straight to the modern electronic computer. The artist deliberately reverted to an old technology that is commonly described as the beginning of the age of computing, but at the same time, by using DNA analysis, he refers to biotechnologies—the most advanced technologies of our time, the development of which is advancing rapidly and will continue, increasingly, to shape our future lives.

“The DNA image is the most culturally authoritative artifact of our era. In the court room it is known as the ‘gold standard’ of criminal identification,” writes the US biomedica artist Paul Vanouse. ¹ Compared to the high costs of a few years ago, DNA tests are now affordable and

used privately by millions of ordinary people who expect these analyses to provide their own selves. ² It can be said that in the collective imaginary, DNA is seen as the ultimate proof of identity and storage of our genetic material. How are artists addressing biotechnologies as the new frontier of science and society? How are they using DNA for their artistic practices? And how is artistic practice relating to what science can verify?

Groundbreaking developments in the life sciences have led to the gradual dissolution of supposed boundaries between natural and artificial life. Today life itself can be artificially shaped. These rapid developments in biotechnology are the central challenge of our age, as they allow us to actively shape our selves and our evolutionary process. They have also brought about a radical change in the understanding of the self, as life has become designable.

Developments in genetic engineering have contributed to an increasing tendency to attribute individualistic characteristics of identity to DNA, as writer Markus Jansen says in his 2015 book *Digitale Herrschaft* (Digital Domination). ³ The reflections on identity have been given a biological dimension. Can DNA, the building block of life, be seen as our biological essence?

Artists have indeed been dealing with these questions. In her work *Stranger Visions* (2012–13), for example, Heather Dewey-Hagborg reconstructed 3D models of human faces using forensic genome research, based on DNA data found on discarded objects such as cigarette butts and chewing gum. The work addresses the increasing surveillance of humans, which is no longer limited to cameras in urban areas, but starts with biological surveillance inside the human body, at the cellular level, through our DNA. Dewey-Hagborg observes: “We exist in a technologically mediated world that is increasingly also a biotechnologically mediated world.”

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The fact that the techniques of knowledge production in laboratories are also critically questioned and that their engineered construction must be made conscious is a consistent theme for Vanouse, whose works employ gel electrophoresis, a method also used in forensic genetics. Vanouse’s *Suspect Inversion Center (SIC)* (2011–ongoing) is a public laboratory in which he reconstructs “genetic fingerprints” from known court cases, for instance the DNA profile of the US football star and alleged murderer O. J. Simpson, but exclusively using his own DNA. ⁵ The work demonstrates the technical construction of a body trace manipulated by laboratory protocol and the misunderstood “naturalness” of the material. Vanouse is primarily interested in demystifying scientific methods and demonstrating and understanding the production of knowledge in laboratories.

As a final example, I would like to mention *The Infinity Engine* (2014–18) by media art pioneer Lynn Hershman Leeson. This project is an extensive exploration of the possibilities of synthetic biology, genetic manipulation, the artificial production of human organs using 3D bioprinting, antibody research, and DNA as a biological storage medium. Hershman Leeson had all artifacts of this exhibition as well as other central fragments of her artistic work transferred to DNA and placed in a biological repository, thus making them accessible to

transferred to DNA and placed in a biological repository, thus making them accessible to posterity. In the context of her work, which has always also revolved around themes of identity and individuality, *The Infinity Engine* is an artistic legacy, or could be described as the artistic DNA of Hershman Leeson.

Here the circle closes to the new work of Emilio Vavarella. The textile created for *rs548049170_1_69869_TT* (*The Other Shapes of Me*) was woven by the artist's mother on a Jacquard loom—biological and digital code combined into a new unit. On purpose, Vavarella put a plural to that title to make space for all the possible “shapes” of his identity, depending on the different possible settings he defines for the transformations, mediations, and visualizations of his biological code.

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