Digital Body / Mutant Body

Identity, Desire, and Resistance in the Algorithmic Age

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Abstract

The following text explores the transformations of the contemporary body in the digital environment, understood not only as a biological support, but also as a political, technological, and performative interface in queer community configurations. Based on a theoretical and practical approach informed by the work of Judith Butler, Paul B. Preciado, Jack Halberstam, and Gilles Deleuze, it analyzes how social media, algorithms, and technologies of digital recording and representation shape bodily expression, the construction of desire, and the semantic forms of the body. It therefore proposes an analysis of the digital body as a symbolic battlefield where new forms of identity, eroticism, and resistance are negotiated. Through the analysis of contemporary discourses and through proposals for artistic creation, it defends the possibility of imagining mutant bodies that escape algorithmic homogenization and open spaces for queerness.
Keywords: *body, digital, queer, social media, desire.*

The digital representation of desiring bodies occurs as a particularly hyperbolic constant in queer communities, just as the recording and representation technologies used stand as a contemporary paragon in the articulation of desire and, therefore, as a unidirectional possibility for both individual and collective identity construction in sexual-affective dissidence. The introduction of social media and the digital image into sexual-affective relationship processes has generated unquestionable changes in the way we communicate with others and with our own bodies.

"*We must start with the most obvious: we are here, we exist in this world, in this time. If we can make such a statement, it is because we are and have a body.*" (*Pérez Galí* 2021, p. 2)

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This statement, which dancer, choreographer, and researcher Aimar Pérez-Galí makes in the volume *The Weight of Gravity*, serves as a starting point for proposing an exercise in questioning and defining the body not only as a fixed essence, but also as a territory in constant transformation. Under this premise, it is possible to open a field of reflection that articulates the body as a set of subjective experiences, historical memories, and structures that shape it from multiple forms and technologies of power over time. Likewise, we can understand the body as the very condition of possibility for inhabiting the world. This imprint leads us to understand the body as an inseparable element in the construction of individual and community subjectivity.

This perspective can be further complicated if we understand it as a cultural, political, and historical territory in a permanent process of construction. In this sense, the body is made, formed, disciplined, adapted, and also proposes resistance.

Michel Foucault clearly demonstrated this in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1976) how modern institutions-schools, hospitals, prisons-have functioned as devices for normalizing the body, molding it according to the needs of power and the social order. Currently, this understanding of the body as a mutable territory is also manifest in struggles over gender identity. Trans, non-binary, and other dissident people demonstrate that the body is not limited to an immutable biological truth, but can be reconfigured through medical technologies, subjective decisions, and social processes. The existence of these expanded or transformed bodies challenges the idea of a natural and fixed body, revealing its deeply performative and political nature. In turn, digital platforms have become a visual showcase for bodies emptied of content and often mutated through filters for their exposure far removed from reality. This corporeal digitalization-represented, visualized, cataloged, labeled, and therefore subject to public judgment-can be equated with the modern institutions that Foucault denounced during the 1970s.

The body, which has historically been an instrument of expression and a living archive of memories and affections in the artistic field, is reconfigured in the new digital paradigm to present itself as a pure, shining shell that fluidly covers the blurred identities of queer communities. Bodily presence, understood as a means of transmitting and containing memories, thus becomes an amalgam of muscles and deformities that continually mutate, posing exercises in escapism that lead to dissolution within the capitalized mass of the normative.

In this diatribe, the digital body is simultaneously presented as a new form of existence and participation in society, understood, therefore, as a space for symbolic, historical, and political negotiation. If our existence in the world is inevitably mediated by a body that we feel, think, inhabit, and transform, what happens when the experiential space is transferred from our physical self to a virtual representation? In this digital age, the body is no longer just flesh: it is a pixel, avatar, filter, biometric data, and affective commodity. The proliferation of visual interfaces has radically reconfigured how the body is represented, perceived, and eroticized, inscribing it within logics of visibility, consumption, and algorithmic control.

The queer body as an embodied subject, as a bodied struggle, is now transformed into a mutant body, a hybrid entity that oscillates between the material and the virtual, the normative and the dissident, the desirable and the unpredictable. It has become an organizational system sustained as a performative archive, a political and technological interface traversed by different intensities and experiential flows.

It is necessary to highlight the particularity of the queer body in that it is indoctrinated to be adaptable and changeable. In a context where, in certain situations, queer subjects are forced to limit and constrain their gender expression to safeguard their own integrity, the body and its representation take on special relevance. The set of gestures articulated by queer bodies sometimes become markers of shame, configuring maps of self-inflicted punishment and the aggression of others. Thus, the digital body appears as a promise of salvation, as a simile of an opportunity to control and modify shameful gestures at will. The digital body is, in turn, often not a place of freedom but a space where we perform to the detriment of our difference, seeking to fit into a castrating normality. The creation of digital images here becomes an opportunity to reconfigure gesture and the archetypal visual memory associated with queerness. In the digital context, platforms can be used to reiterate or subvert these norms: for example, a queer profile that plays with gender ambiguity, digital drag, or filters as tools of dissent. But there are also risks: platforms have algorithms that reward normativity and punish dissent, rendering invisible or censoring queer, racialized, or non-binary bodies. Digital performativity can thus become a trap sustained by apparent visibility. The aspirational model required and proposed by social media is organized according to very specific parameters (muscled, waxed, tattooed) and that permanently visible on social media becomes a sign of self-control and success; it is a

body that speaks the language of late capitalism. (Mira, 2015) In this approach, the body is exposed not only as an aesthetic surface but, as we will see later, it becomes a biopolitical device, where discipline, performance and appearance converge in the same narrative of productivity and self-exploitation as described by Byung-Chul Han when he speaks of the false personal fulfillment through effort proposed by neoliberal devices on contemporary subjects and bodies (Han, 2014).

In this new digital non-reality, social media operates as normalizing devices: algorithms are not neutral, but rather prioritize content that generates interaction, generally sexualized, standardized, or normative. Thus, desire becomes a consumer product, and the body, its currency. The anxiety over digital validation reveals how subjectivity has been commodified in the attention economy. Audiovisual media, in all its dimensions, plays a fundamental role in this play of representations for the construction of subjectivities in virtual spaces, offering possibilities for dissent and visibility, but also for control and submission to normative canons.

After Judith Butler (2007) proposed that gender is no longer an internal identity, but a series of repeated acts that materialize through the body in social space, we can affirm that in the digital age, this performativity intensifies: each post, each filter, each like reinforces or subverts norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In *Dysphoria Mundi* (2022), Paul B. Preciado exposes how the pharmacopornographic regime transforms bodies into digital interfaces where technologies of power are inscribed that regulate what can be seen, desired, or even exist, generating a highly dissociated subjectivity between the physical body and the represented body. For queer subjects, this implies a double violence: they are pushed to represent acceptable versions (clean, sexualized, stylized), while their real bodies (trans, disabled, aged) are hidden or rejected. At the same time, Preciado defends the possibility of using these technologies to hack the norm, through glitches, visible dysphoria, and bodies that don't fit the binary pattern or the beauty algorithm.

In this failure, in the dysphoric and glitched representation of the queer body we can find, as pointed out Jack Halberstam (2018), a form of resistance to the dominant success of cisheteropatriarchal normativity. On social media, where everything is oriented towards visual perfection and success measured in likes, the distorted, disembodied, fluid, and fragmented bodies that we present here as queer corporalities can become a representation strategy capable

of breaking the ideal aesthetic, showing themselves vulnerable, chaotic, grotesque, or non-productive. This aesthetic failure is posed as a political way of confronting normativity through other bodies that do not want to be ideal for the algorithm, which choose dissidence, incoherence, and non-identity as forms of freedom.

From the failed (old) and mutant (fractured and reconfigured) bodies of London-based photographer John Coplans's Body Parts series (2000–2003), to the cyborg and digitized bodies that audiovisual artist Arca embodies in her contemporary performances and video clips, we can trace a genealogy that traverses the mutation of the body as a territory of representation and site of desire, while also posing it as a space for resistance. In this interval, digital technologies, social media, and algorithmic culture have radically transformed forms of presence and self-figuration. By photographing her own nude, aging body, Coplans constructed an archive of vulnerability that challenged dominant narratives of beauty and youth. But at the same time, we can glimpse in her proposal modes of representation without the current representational dynamics that already predict new forms of bodies, faceless, without recognizable identity, functioning as fragmented surfaces that connect to configure new forms of the known. A body that fails in the normative terms of desire, but precisely in that failure finds aesthetic and political power.

Twenty-five years later, Arca (Alejandra Ghersi) embodies a reconfigured, pharmacologically, technologically expanded, hybrid body that transits between the human and the machine. In her proposals, from music videos such as Nonbinary (Heyman 2020) or Time (MANSON, 2020) to body prostheses and installations in collaboration with the artist Carlos Saez, the body, her body, is no longer presented as a trace of what has been lived, but as a mutable prototype, an entity that is constructed, destroyed and reprogrammed in real time. Thus, the journey that unites Coplans with Arca is not only a technical or aesthetic evolution, but an epistemic shift: from the body as a biographical archive of experience to the body as a mutant and political interface. In this transition, corporality ceases to be a surface of representation and becomes a field of ontological experimentation, a place where flesh and code intersect, inevitably conditioning queer affective performativity.

The comparison between the two artists ultimately reveals how digital contemporaneity has replaced the obsession with the body's presence with a politics of its expanded representation, in which visibility

becomes both a privilege and a burden. The body, once a document and memory, is now a stream of data, an avatar, a projection: a space of symbolic dispute in which the possibility of queerness is constantly redefined between materiality and simulation.
The broad space generated between the two creators is the ideal starting point from which we propose the creation of new avatar bodies configured through the use of digital tools linked to the creation, manipulation, and dissemination of digital images. Queerness thus transcends identity to propose a way of inhabiting virtuality by deconstructing traditional bodily frameworks and allowing for experimentation with emancipatory bodily fictions.

Digital Body / Mutant Body[1] is a project for the production of audiovisual material intended to become an installation that captures the previously outlined assumptions and proposes a liberated bodily representation that challenges normative forms of body representation. The initial production of the audiovisual material arose from collaborative meetings and workshops with different stakeholders, where the recording of bodies, now present, was proposed using digital scanning tools. This material will later be displayed in an audiovisual installation that embraces the premise of the body as a constant process of transformation, overwhelmed and sometimes unsuccessful, and which, through error in recording and its subsequent post-production using artificial intelligence, proposes a new form of digital performativity. In this way, representation escapes creative control, ceding the capacity for decision-making and transformation to the digital algorithm, creating dissident bodies removed from normative desire. With these strategies, the bodies generated for this piece escape any conditioning that could push them into stagnation within the descriptive containers of the normal. The main objectives of this proposal are to question the logic of hegemonic bodily representation in digital environments and to propose a queer aesthetic/ethics that celebrates error, mutation, the unreadable body, and unstable performativity as forms of resistance and community building.
This project is born from the intersection of artistic practice and theoretical research using a transdisciplinary working methodology. An approach that understands the creative process not only as aesthetic production, but also as a tool for knowledge and critical analysis. From this perspective, *Digital Body / Mutant Body* is conceived as a research device that allows us to problematize the notions of the digital body, representation, and desire in virtual space.

The installation also functions as an experimental space where digital technologies and collaborative processes derived from the collection of random and anonymous body recordings converge, seeking to address a totalizing vision of the queer digital body.
Likewise, working with emerging digital technologies is seen to critically explore the processes of virtualization and identity mutation. In this sense, *Digital Body / Mutant Body* is an example of how artistic practice can highlight the tensions between materiality and virtuality, presence and anonymity. This concern can also be observed repeatedly in the work of some contemporary artists, as is the case in much of the work of Italian artist Martina Menegon, where she proposes new and innovative ways of representing dissident bodies in the digital age.
The methodology adopted in *Digital Body / Mutant Body* does not seek a neutral analysis, but rather the active involvement of art as situated research, capable of generating knowledge from the aesthetic experience itself. In this way, we question the usual forms of bodily representation on both social media and digital media, and we can make the queer desiring experience visible as a form of digital dissidence. Recording through digital portable scanning, introducing these fragments into synthetic image generators, and projecting the resulting materials onto different surfaces are technological intervention strategies that function as a political act, proposing an exercise in escapism from any narrative imposed by corporality, binaries, cisheteronormatives, and misnamed biological ones. The mutant, the postorganic, the fluid takes control of desires here. Considering that We live in a present deeply marked by the hyperrepresentation of the body. Digital platforms, mobile devices, and social media have transformed the body into an interface, a personal brand, a visual archive that must be constantly updated, edited, and displayed. This logic is not neutral: it is traversed by algorithms that reward normativity, youth, whiteness, thinness, and cisheterosexuality. Faced with this regime of visibility, dissident, trans, queer, racialized, aging, and ableist bodies are systematically displaced, rendered invisible, or reduced to forms of superficial consumption. This installation stems from the desire to resist this digital normalization and to propose a new imaginary for the queer body: not as a coherent surface, but as a fault zone, a glitch, a dysphoric political presence that refuses to fit in.

1 Corpo digitale / Corpo mutante.
Identità e registrazione nell'era digitale first workshop held with students of the Accademia di Belle Arti Lecce on May 29, 2025.

The visual language is structured around an aesthetic of error, dislocation, and mutation, in which bodies appear as unstable, disembodied, fluid, and multiple presences. Materializing non-normative corporalities, fragmented or mutant bodies challenge the binary taxonomies and visual hierarchies imposed by representation algorithms. These digital figures do not aspire to formal perfection but rather highlight the limits of the interface and the fractures of normative desire. Videos generated and modified through synthetic digital processes present queer bodies in motion, which intermingle, dissolve, or are disfigured, questioning bodily legibility and visual control and configuring an indissoluble whole as a metaphorical image of the queer desiring community. The use of artificial intelligence does not seek to simulate or enhance appearances, but rather to critically subvert them. Technologies are reappropriated as tools of dissent, producing glitches, errors, and distortions: broken filters that deform the digitized image and reveal the fragility of the avatar. Representational failure, in this context, operates as a gesture of aesthetic resistance to the algorithmic control of identity and desire. The installation is ultimately presented as an act of visual insurrection against the algorithmic regime of representation. A possibility rather than a result that synthesizes an intentional resistance. Our bodies are not made to fit into a grid. We are not products; we are not interfaces. This installation project is itself a set of intentional errors, an interruption in the calm flow of the digital continuum, a call to disobey, opening space for unfinished, mutant, amorphous, and free bodies. The bodies derived from queer politics are thus shown as territories of thought, action, and desire traversed by technologization and inhabitants of dissolution as a disruptive approach to the lines and borders of the normative imaginary.

In dialogue with this vision, Paul B. Preciado argues in *Dysphoria Mundi* (2022) that dysphoria cannot be understood as an individual or pathological condition, but rather as an epochal phenomenon that affects all bodies in a world traversed by ecological, technological, political, and gender crises. From this perspective, queer artistic practices reveal the mutant and unstable nature of contemporary subjectivity. The project *Cuerpo digital / cuerpo mutant* (Digital Body / Mutant Body) fits into this horizon by experimenting with fragmented bodies, artificial intelligence, and synthetic images, demonstrating how social media and digital exposure generate hybrid bodies between the physical and the digital. A conglomerate of flesh in a liminal state that forms a representative whole of contemporary digital corporeality, bodies that serve to construct a

metaphor for queer communities and the subjects that comprise them. In an age of disciplinary algorithms, it is impossible to find answers or solutions. Rather, it seems necessary to expose the zones of doubt, desire, error, and transformation in order to propose hollow intersections where we can house our possibility for existence. Artistic practice here becomes a tool capable of drawing and supposing forms of a possible future, where we can think of hybrid forms of community that recognize the value of the body without rejecting the possibilities of the digital environment. It is necessary to recover the strange, the dissident, the removed from the norm, the imperfect as an act of subversion against a social spectrum saturated with perfect images and standardized desires. And from this point, we can propose discourses that propose new anatomies, new ways of existing at the intersection of flesh, camera, and code. The mutant body is not a dystopia, but an ethical and aesthetic possibility for inhabiting the digital world from a position of dissidence.

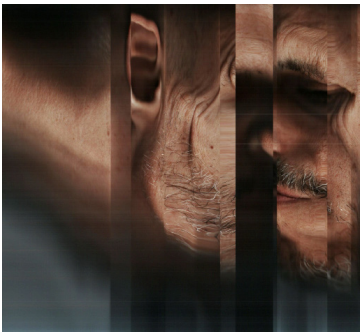


Fig. 1.
Gabaldón, Mutante Digita I,
2025 (work in progress).



Fig. 2.
Gabaldón, Mutante Digita II,
2025 (work in progress).

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Fig. 1. Gabaldón, Mutante Digita I, 2025 (work in progress). Digital image from personal archive.

Fig. 2. Gabaldón, Mutante Digita II, 2025 (work in progress). Digital image from personal archive.