Podcast "behind the screens, behind the scenes" Counting Feelings | MELT (Iz Paehr & Ren Loren Britton) medienwerk.nrw & Sophie Emilie Beha

INTRODUCTION

Sophie Emilie Beha:
Hello, my name is Sophie Emilie Beha and I'm happy to welcome you to the next episode of "behind the screens, behind the scenes". Today I talk with the arts-design duo MELT in Berlin, which consists of Ren Loren Britton and Iz Paehr. MELT studies and experiments with shape-shifting processes as they meet technologies, sensory media and pedagogies in a warming world. Ren and Iz build worlds along three arts-design research structures: Anti-Ableist Technologies - about whom we will also talk in the podcast -, The Meltionary and Zeitgeber. They activate shape-shifting processes that generate material, aesthetic and transformations intersecting Trans* feminism and Disability Justice. Their work interweaves themes of: climate change, coalition building, critical technical practice and access. MELT's work resources ways of being together that figure in the present and future our flourishing. MELT shares work in the forms of videos, installations, websites, lectures and workshops.

The project we are going to talk about today is called "Counting Feelings". Ren & Iz are Media Art Fellows of the State of Northrine Westphalia. "Counting Feelings" researches how and with what intentions the experiences of marginalized groups are quantified and counted as data, and how we can use data to tell or re-count these stories differently. It explores means and tools of data collection to develop structures that lovingly engage with trans* and disabled people's knowledge."Counting Feelings" is a speculative project that takes trans* and disabled knowledge as a starting point to feel into and test not-yet-existent data collections.

And for this episode we chose a different way of creating it, because we wanted to adapt the process of making this episode to the needs of everybody involved: Ren, Iz and I first had a written conversation, where we met online in an online document and wrote together. Afterwards we translated the text into sound, where each of us recorded the written answers at home - and then they were melted into each other to create this episode.

[sound: smoke]

CONVERSATION
Hi Ren & Iz, it's so nice to have this conversation with you - and to have you in the podcast of course. Your project is about specific data sets - what kind of data are we talking about?

Iz Paehr:
Hi Sophie, we are so happy to talk to you! This is Iz speaking. Let me offer a short visual description of how we are meeting on this online document: I am seeing an online doc in my browser with the title "MELT: Podcast conversation". Sophie is writing in blue, Ren chose a light red, and I am writing in dark violet. Your first question was about data, and what we mean when we say data. This question of what data is and what data might become sits at the heart of our artistic research for Counting Feelings. We are

interested in reformulating what data comes to mean for and from Trans* and autistic experiences.

Ren Loren Britton:
This is Ren speaking. When we started our project Counting Feelings we noticed that common practices of collecting and analyzing information that exist in our communities aren't commonly understood as data practices. Think of top surgery organizing pads where everyone writes onto an online pad what they can offer, and then comes over and cares for or sends something to someone post surgery. Or sharing excel sheets about doctors that aren't pathologizing Trans* and/or autistic experiences. This kind of data makes our lives possible, and because of this we decided to take up space in "data" as a concept and practice.

In three workshops, we researched what kinds of information people from our communities collect, store, evaluate and use in their daily lives, and came to the conclusion that these habits can be understood as Trans* and crip data work. To make this claim, we build on lineages of crip technoscientific practices that we understand our practice as working out of and continuing.

By that we mean the everyday, collective and ongoing practices that disabled people engage to diverge from norms that don't suit us, including data practices. In this work we look to our disabled ancestors and elders who have interrupted ableism as normal to make more accessible worlds possible. One example from local history is when disabled activist Gusti Steiner & nondisabled journalist Ernst Klee with their class "Coping with the Environment" blockaded streetcars in Frankfurt in 1974 to make the public aware that many disabled people could not use that means of transportation. These kinds of "disruptive attacks" to the status quo are the kinds of crip technoscientific lineages that we understand ourselves as working within. Proposing creative alternatives and simultaneously pointing out the problems we are amidst.

Holding onto the creative potential of crip technoscience, we began making datasets that can, for example, be experienced through touch. One data set we developed is a weighted blanket that we conceptualized as a "data set of weight". This data set holds together differently weighted objects that we collected in our everyday life such as stones, masks, or cut-out clothing tags. The data entries are sewn into the fabric. This data set is built on the knowledge from our lived experience that weighted blankets can provide calm. Here, we drew on autistic knowledge. In the end, we sewed collections of objects into the blanket, and the work became about experiencing the weight of these collected objects that we transformed into a printed data set which we exhibited alongside the blanket.

[sound: sewing machine, scraping, folding, drawing, scissors]

The energy of your work & the data sets are maybe a counter possibility to Gusti Steiner & Ernst Klees "disruptive attacks" - something warm, emotional, comforting?

Some of our data sets are about celebrating disabled and Trans* experiences, so for Trans* and disabled people we do hope that they can also be empowering and comforting. It's different with data sets such as the "data set of screams" that we are working on, which collects screams of anger towards oppressive conditions.

Another data set we've been working on, 'Data Sets we Wished Existed', also holds space for both the frustration of the missing gaps of data that would be needed that

would make our lives more possible. It simultaneously puts some wishes out into the world about what data we wish to have available. While working on this data set, it happened many times that when someone said "I wish we had a data set for "data on alternatives to big tech access tools" for example, that someone else said - oh! I know someone who is working on a project around that. In a way these data sets become both a site of community building and sharing interests and connecting to one another, as well as naming the persistent absences that influence the kinds of possibilities for thriving we have. This kind of naming of absences is something we also admire greatly about the work that Mimi Onuoha has done in her project "The Library of Missing Data Sets" which also speaks nearby to our project about what kinds of data is collected and how that shapes what kinds of "results" about a problem are to be found.

Can't anger also be empowering? ;)

Absolutely! And warmth can also be a "disrupting attack". It might be about holding both – empowerment in the sense that Trans* and autistic experiences are rarely represented at all – which then disrupts already whatever normative space they/we enter into – and also this idea of attack which can be uncomfortable, such as addressing ableism, voicing screams and vulnerabilities.

And also the power that comes with making oneself vulnerable too.

So it's more of an act of making transparent what "data" can be and how you can use that within your own community?

And also to challenge current conceptions of data. One starting point for the project was the critique of the autistic community towards the project *Spektrum10K* which aims to collect genetic information on autism. But many autistic people have voiced since decades that what we need is less ableism, more support, and not genetic information that might give doctors the chance to genetically disappear our way of being in the world. So this "data collection" project is what we are up against, among many other equally harmful examples. From there, we learned about and with amazing projects of disabled and Trans* folks that instead of following these harmful paradigms, instead collect data on for example barriers. A data project we admire is the project #AbleismusTötet that collects data on abuse in care homes in Germany. As arts-designers, our interest was not in adding more data in the conventional sense though – even if we think this is absolutely necessary too. Instead, we started experimenting with materials and sensorial perception to make data sets that step out of current paradigms of how data is defined.

Are there some data practices that can help or be included in everyday practices of Trans* and autistic people?

In our work in the exhibition, Counting Feelings, we had three works on view - one, **Beginning nodes for revolutionary data practices or groundwork for reimagining data** consists of a floor installation with statements emerging from workshops with Trans* and disabled participants considering our engagements with data; these statements entangle with clay data points that visitors are invited to move around to express interest in the statements and to play and stim with. We thought of this as a data practice that could expand from what kinds of relations we would want to have with data. In this work the statements on the floor read "(Not) Quantifiable", "Pleasurable Data", BOYB "Bring Your Own Bed", "Making Space to Dream of the Not-Yet-Here", "Multiplicity of Ways of Being". Each of these statements opened the space for a

playful, poetic and exploratory relation to what data practices could be in the everyday for Trans* and Autistic people – especially in light of the foreclosures and in-accessibilities that persist when talking about everyday data for us.

On a practical level, working further on the data set "Data Sets and Lists we wished existed", meaning: making the lists and data sets actually, would be great for everyday practices and experiences. For example, one wish was for Trans* led studies on the effects of taking hormones over decades, which plainly does not exist.

Harmful rumors perpetuate about what might happen to our bodies over time. These rumors might be true, or they might be coming from anti-trans folks and then become re-told within trans* community as though they were true – but we can't look up information in a more informed way, nor can any medical health professional either.

Another wish was for data on how to improve access to help lines in Germany, for example by learning how to provide access to support that does not make speaking on the phone the only option, as this can be a barrier to autistic, Deaf and other disabled people.

Some of the wishes we collected in this data set are possible to be worked on right now: a list of selfies of Trans* people, or a list of accessible clubs. Others require infrastructure, time, budgets. But the existing infrastructures perpetuate oftentimes harmful paradigms such as the aforementioned *Spektrum10K*, which brings us into the position that structures would need to be rethought from the ground up to make research that treats Trans* and disabled people respectfully. Luckily, there are more openly Trans* and autistic researchers around these days, but we cannot underestimate the time, trust and rethinking it will take to even begin acquiring this much needed data.

[sound: winder, bubbling]

How did you choose the materials for the data sets? What questions, feelings, emotions, concepts were leading you? How was this process?

We began working on these data sets in the context of our media arts fellowship with NRW. As artistic research fellows with Konstanze Schütze and the University of Cologne we decided to host three workshops, two of which were closed and open only to folks who also identified as Autistic and/or, Trans* and/or Disabled. In these workshops together we posed questions about what data could come to mean for us, and also to discuss the problems we already found evident with datafication all around us, and what we might wish it to be otherwise. In these workshops we more clearly identified two different directions that we might continue to explore in regards to data practices. One includes understanding data here and now: ableism and anti-trans sentiment is widespread and in current political realities deepening. In this moment it then becomes necessary to collect data about our barriers to access and the ways they change so that we can argue within any legal system for better policy. Simultaneously we tried to hold open the space for what data could mean should ableism, anti-trans sentiment and racism not be the organizing oppressive power structures of our everyday. If this was the case, then data practice could then become something else that we could open up and play with in a more experiential way. This is a jump we are holding open towards dreaming with data otherwise.

Making conceptually and materially the jump from an understanding of data as numbers and lists on a computer to sensorial installations was a long process. Some of it

happened in workshops, some of it in our studio through reading, collecting, arranging, playing. For example, we organized a workshop in which we invited others to join with collections from their everyday lives, such as all the stones they collected in a week, or all the makeup they use everyday. We then transformed these collections into data sets by using predefined methods of for example describing and weighing every object. This notion of weight then informed our data set of weight. For one of the other works, Pop Up Disabled Data Center, we worked with large fabrics that we stitched together so they would shelter visitors like a tent.

I like that the fabrics in the Pop Up Disabled Data Center were not one large single thing, but different materials (collaboratively?) stitched together, and that the tent is protecting but at the same time also permeable, because much light can fall through the fabrics. How do you deal with this balance/ relationship of outside and inside and the communication between those spaces?

This work was conceptualized so that it could always be recombined between the different panels, the grommets connecting them allow the shape of the tent to be laced up differently like a big shoe, split open. Woven together, temporarily, and specifically according to the space. In the first installation of this work at the Arts Library at the University of Cologne the data center was like a large "U" shape wrapping visitors in a partially protected space. For the second installation at the gallery, We Are AIA (Awareness in Art) in Zürich, the data center was installed more like clouds covering from above, which then allowed the data sets to dangle down towards the ground.

For me this question also relates to the workshops, because some of them too were open to "everyone" (which in this case meant mostly university workers and students), and some of them were invited participants only, and we decided also to not share everything that was produced within these workshops with an outside audience. In this, we centered consent around sharing any information outside of the context of the closed group.

Which kinds of tools did you use to make the spaces you were working in, for example the workshops, safer spaces (and I don't know if you actually use that term) or spaces, the participants could feel comfortable and safe in?

We held the two closed workshops online for COVID-safety and access reasons. As tools or methods we introduced the platform we were meeting on and its access options, such as how to activate closed captions on Zoom. This we did because we met with an intergenerational group and not everyone was acquainted with video conferencing software. We also asked for everyone's access needs in advance and in the meetings, so that we could collectively care for them. Another method was using collective conditions or intentions, which are common agreements within the group to decide how we want to be together.

During the one in-person workshop we organized we used tactile elements such as embroidered braille on a fabric. So, embroidery and work with fabrics was part of the preparation process.

One data set is called "Energy (Ac)counting" - it consists of cutlery and kitchen utensils. What does this data set tell the people who interact with it?

In different disability communities, different ways of accounting for energy exist, but interestingly, many of them work with kitchen utensils as metaphors! The first and most

well-known theory is the spoon theory by Christine Miserandino, who developed it based on her experiences as a chronically ill person. Here, one has a number of spoons available per day, and each activity removes a certain defined amount of spoons. For example, taking the stairs might cost 3 spoons of a total of 15 spoons available per day. So counting spoons means counting energy. This theory has later been expanded, because for neurodivergent people the amount of spoons may not be easy to pre-calculate, as an empty dimly lit supermarket may cost less spoons than a surprisingly full one with loud music. So, in our data set, we collected these different ways in which energy is measured so that readers can pick the kitchen utensil of their choice. For disabled people it may be about celebrating the vastness of approaches, for nondisabled people the data set offers some learning about differences in experience.

Counting as a (empowering) technique - is this maybe also the reason for the title of your project "Counting Feelings"?

We became interested in the contradiction of wanting to count something that many people deem uncountable: feelings. During the fellowship, we started every meeting and every workshop with counting our feelings and sharing that number aloud or in writing. Over time, some patterns emerged: For some people, a larger number signified more stress, for others, a small number of feelings meant that one feeling was very dominant. It became an interesting way of checking in to not ask what someone is feeling, or how they are doing (things sometimes experienced as difficult to answer for neurodivergent folks), but how many feelings were countable. In this way counting became an empowering technique of sharing feelings and feelings about feelings on terms that diverged from more established ways of checking in with one another.

Another kitchen tool, that is used in "Energy (Ac)counting" is the fork. According to your data set, the Fork Theory was proposed as an addition to Spoon Theory by Jen Rose based on the expression: „Stick a fork in me, I'm done". Should we establish a new perspective on mundane, everyday life things, such as kitchen tools or forks? How could this recast of inner views enrich us?

The everydayness of kitchen utensils is maybe what makes it easier to talk to nondisabled people about experiences that are not part of their everyday. At least that is how Christine Miserandino begins her essay on using the metaphor of the spoon to explain her experience with lupus to a friend. In this way, opening kitchen drawers can be a reminder that our experiences with energy vary.

Your question also points to experiences of pleasure and survival in the everyday. One reason why Forks and Spoons and Knives are so impactful for us to consider and reconsider as artists is that by using something that is so quotidian as a fork to talk about something as embodied as energy is a queering of this object away from its original use. This move of taking an object and queering its use towards another objective is related to how we approach materials in our practice. To assume that any material is consistently only one thing is a kind of hardening that we stay away from. Instead, a spoon can be a clock, can be a companion, can be a visible or felt reminder of how to care for oneself and sometimes can be a tool, too.

You also mentioned the "Data Sets and Lists We Wished Existed". Can you give some examples, which kind of wishes are on that list? how were they made? What can they do?

The data set titled "Data Sets and Lists We Wished Existed" was made during the 3rd COUNTING FEELINGS workshop with Trans* and disabled participants. This data set includes many wishes of data that would be needed as well as calls to collect information on underappreciated projects / information such as lists of poetry by Trans* disabled BIPOC writers. These and other lists likely exist, and yet are under-shared because they are small, local or not yet easy to find.

Some of the examples of data sets that we wished existed are:
- "data on alternatives to big tech access tools (captioning for example)";
- "a list of resources to help navigate bureaucratic paperwork"
- "resources to voice access needs (access rider examples) any other templates, guides, frameworks";
- "data on what happens when taking testosterone and estrogen over long periods of time";
- "a list of resources for setting up care pod community structures & creating access for each other with various different disabilities".

[sound: excerpt of "Data Sets and Lists We Wished Existed" read out loud by Ren & Iz]

How do you make the collected data accessible? Are the project and the data sets finally or do they last forever?

Working with accessibility is a major part of the creative engine of our work as MELT. Whenever publishing something, or finalizing it we work with at least two modes of access. Meaning that if something is shared as an image it includes alt-text, or if something is written, we make an audio recording and make the writing screen-reader accessible. Working on this album with you is making the data sets more accessible. Until now they are only available to be read in the exhibition space, so by recording them they will be accessible to be listened to in this album.

Since access is a transformative creative process for us we are expecting that recording the data sets will also transform them in some way. As audio on the internet, they will become accessible in an asynchronous way compared to the timespan of an exhibition. Making an audio recording is often associated with making what is recorded permanent, but that's not how we are thinking of this: Rather, the recordings present an "audio screenshot" of our working process. The data sets are still open to change: For example, we have so far only considered contributions in English, and we mostly reference projects from the Global North that have websites or otherwise available published materials. During the workshops, we have worked mostly with people in a European time zone.

If you could make two wishes - one for the data sets - and one for your communities, what would they be?

For our community: to be in the position where we are deciding and working on in collaboration on what sorts of data projects are relevant for us and would support our thriving. For the data sets: to hold and accessibly and freely share all the data + information that might be needed to support our lives.

It would be great to actually move towards creating the data that people from our communities crave, and to use this data to push for political changes.

Thank you for this podcast episode, Sophie!

Thank you for listening or reading along, everyone.

Thank you, for being here with me, Ren & Iz.