

PROOF OF STAKE: TECHNOLOGICAL CLAIMS

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CONTENTS

| | |
|------------|--|
| 3 | FOREWORD |
| 5 | AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE ON THE BOOK'S RATIONALE AND STRUCTURE |
| 10 | PROOF OF STAKE: TECHNOLOGICAL CLAIMS. INSTALLATION VIEWS |
| 27 | PROOF OF STAKE: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TINA RIVERS RYAN AND SIMON DENNY |
| 31 | ARTWORKS, PROOF OF STAKE: TECHNOLOGICAL CLAIMS Robert Alice, Mel Chin, Joshua Citarella, Simon Denny, Fang Di, Stephanie Dinkins, DISNOVATION, Sarah Friend, Isa Genzken, Holly Herndon / Mathew Dryhurst, Femke Herregraven, <i>Mike Kelley</i> , Josh Kline, Paul Kolling, Agnieszka Kurant, <i>James Luna</i> , Karamia Müller, New Red Order (NRO - Zack Khalil, Adam Khalil, Jackson Polys), Yuri Pattison, Timur Si-Qin, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Krista Belle Stewart, <i>Paul Thek</i> , Luke Willis Thompson, Prateek Vijan und Beecoin (a project of KUNSTrePUBLIK (Einhoff, Horst, Sachs) in cooperation with Hiveeyes and Nascent). |
| 101 | TEN CLAIMS ON BEHALF OF TECHNOLOGY Robin Holt, Timon Beyes |
| 111 | OBJECT STAKE EXCHANGE, 2021 Simon Denny |
| 117 | TENSORFLOW Clemens Apprich |
| 121 | COMPASS Yuriko Furuhashi |
| 126 | FILTER Gillian Russell and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun |
| 130 | ACOUSTIC TILE Reinhold Martin |
| 134 | SPRAY-CAN Ute Holl |
| 138 | MEME Nishant Shah |
| 143 | BLANKETS Tania Pérez-Bustos |
| 149 | STICKY NOTE Viviane Sergi |
| 153 | THE WEARABLE Kalindi Vora |
| 157 | PAPER (KAMI) Yutaka Yamauchi and Ko Kado |
| 163 | CRYPTO TOKEN Geert Lovink |
| 168 | THE MEDIEVAL ADMINISTRATIVE ROLL Marisa Galvez |
| 172 | HIGH VACUUM Rachele Delucchi |
| 177 | KANBAN Marc Steinberg |
| 182 | PASSWORD Clare Birchall |
| 186 | DUST Bettina Vismann |
| 190 | THE T NEEDLE Denise Tse-Shang Tang |
| 193 | AUTONOMOUS VEHICLE Maya Indira Ganesh |
| 198 | SMART DRUGS Joshua Neves |
| 203 | VESSEL Günter Figal |
| 209 | Colophon |

THE T NEEDLE

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What is a testosterone - or T - needle?

What is the power embedded within a T needle?

How does a T needle organize one's life?

As with most needles, the T needle is administered with precision, aiming to give the user physical transformations of their / his choice. The T refers to testosterone. The frequency of injections and the concentrated dose of testosterone drawn up by each needle from the vial determines the treatment that enables one to attain physical characteristics that are commonly associated with the category of being male.

'It gives you a new life,' Ah Chong an informant in tone of my studies, claims.

In reality, there are multiple steps involved in attaining the T needle. A transgender man or transmasculine-identified individual can visit the Gender Identity Clinic at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Hong Kong for a physical and psychological assessment of one's gender identity upon turning eighteen years of age. If hormone therapy is prescribed, a schedule of testosterone injections would follow. Injections are often seen as the most effective form of clinical intervention for gender-affirmative healthcare. In Hong Kong, one can either visit the public hospital or a private clinic for treatment. Testosterone can be given through gel, skin patches, pellets, pills, and injections. But the injection is the dominant medium: it offers tangible results that enables one to step closer to establishing

a desired form of masculine identity and to appear as one should be. The beginning of stubble forming on the chin, the ease of building up biceps and the gradual broadening of shoulders are rewards for following a schedule of injections. The T needle is often the first step into achieving a particular form of selfhood and manhood for many transgender men and transmasculine individuals. In my interviews with trans-identified men in Hong Kong, the T needle was often brought up as being the game-changer, a fast track to substantiating a desired gender identity and a tool to organize the timing of physical bodily transformations. The T needle marks the progression of time and life. Yet if treatment is disrupted, one is immediately faced with fears beyond control.

'What if my voice starts to soften up...like a girl?'

'What if I start to lose my status as a man?'

'What if...what if...they can tell?'

In this essay, I will bring up three narrative accounts to illustrate how the needle reorganizes trans selfhood, in particular in its relation to notions of urgency, lifetime, and distance. The first narrative demonstrates how sixteen year-old Jake's desperation for a male body is accelerated through the possibility of accessing T injections. The second narrative features changes in Ah Chong's life as the effect of T injections progresses. Steve as the third narrator recalls his anxieties as distance gets in the way of receiving T needles by post. Jake, Ah Chong and Steve have all developed a

different relationship to the T needle and perhaps a different way of counting time.

There are many ways of describing the time we are living in. Any form of normalcy appears strange, it lingers at the tip of the tongue, unable to make itself present. 'Are we living in strange times?' David Eng and Shinhee Han (2019) ask, as they ruminate on racial melancholia and racial dissociation experienced by Asian Americans. Eng and Han pose the contradicting notion of living in the US with discourses of diversity and multiculturalism on one hand and intensifying racial conflicts on the other. Here in the port city of Hong Kong, just last year around this time, daily routines were fundamentally altered as protests, sit-ins, sing-a-longs broke out across the city, disrupted the ordinary way of life on one hand, forged solidarities among communities or fragmented society into many clusters, depending on how one situates oneself.

The arrival of the pandemic reoriented time and movements.

Strange encounters with time and bodily transformations ensue.

Or perhaps, as Elisabeth Freeman (2010) suggests, 'the experience of not fitting in often feels both like having the wrong body and like living in a different time zone' (p. 172). The intensity of feeling and being in a mismatched, foreign body has often been articulated by informants in my in-depth interviews with transgender men and transmasculine individuals in Hong Kong during 2020 and 2021. Yet living in a different time zone is a novel idea. So even time, like gender, has variance. Informants recalled differences in how time was experienced and seconds were counted, as well as differences in how moments were connected and memories were disassociated. Having had the chance to discuss in-depth about the processes in developing and building a trans man's body, I have increasingly been more aware of how the T needle organizes their everyday life. The process of 'becoming a visible man,' as Jamison Green (2004) puts it aptly, is to endure surgical procedures that are, to say the least, a series of complicated medical interventions that aim to reconstruct a body in alignment with one's psycho-sexual subjectivity and to enhance social recognition in the public realm—but these medical interventions often have no guarantee of functionality in terms of acute physical alterations to one's body. Rather than focusing on the actual gender affirmation surgeries, I want to focus on the T needle as an object with a clear purpose of making distinct changes in one's body, in this case, an object instilled with promises to achieve a desired personhood. The object itself is not only desirable but also made to be desirable because of its potential effects on one's bodily transformations. Its potential is only magnified through the plethora of FTM transition videos on social media. The mapping and tracing of progress could be encouraging, yet at the same time, missing an injection puts one's psyche being and physical life at risk. The schedule towards sustaining the physicality of trans manhood becomes broken.

Urgency

Sixteen-year-old Jake is desperate to get on the T train. He has long known about his desire to become a young man. He watched transition videos on Instagram and imagined his own physical changes if only he had total access to treatment. During our Zoom interview, Jake described how he learnt from the WhatsApp trans youth group of the medical options and home remedies. Information gave him hope. A hope that he would one day become the man that he desires.. Jake's voice has already become hoarse after taking anabolic steroids commonly used by bodybuilders. He bought them at various pharmacies and just lied to the shopkeeper that he's buying them for his older brother who is an avid bodybuilder. But this is not going to be easy. He is currently enrolled in a coeducational Christian faith-based secondary school with strict regulations on gender expressions. He is not allowed to have his hair cut short or shaved. He has to wear a dress as school uniform for girls. During class, Jake recalled a teacher talking about homosexuality as a sin and the need for conversion therapy to cure gays and lesbians.

'I sound like I have a permanent flu now,' he laughed. I asked him about his parents. 'I hope they don't find out. I can't wait to turn eighteen. I can't wait to have a new life. I can't wait for treatment. I can't wait for all of this to work. I've learnt as much as I could on YouTube videos.' Jake's voice was sharp yet quivering, trying to spit out every word as fast as he could over Zoom. I could see him rolling his body back and forth, getting more worked up on the issue of hormone therapy. I asked what he knew about the T needle. He has already researched and studied the pros and cons of using a smaller or a larger needle. He explained to me that most of the trans youth he talked to on the WhatsApp group are divided about the effectiveness of different needles. Some opt for thinner gauge needles that spell less pain when injected under the skin but are generally perceived to be less effective. Others opt for the intramuscular thick gauge needles, aiming for deeper injections into the glute. These are potentially more painful and require more expertise on behalf of the individual. I asked him for his preference. Jake, of course, wanted the intramuscular needle.

When I finally got to meet him in person at the subway station, Jake wore a backpack and walked slowly towards me. He was on his school's lunch break and took the train to meet up with me. With long black hair down on his shoulders, we talked about the latest happenings in his school and family life, the non-responsive school counsellor and the unknowing parents, basically authority figures in his life. I listened and soaked in his impatience of not being able to come out as a trans youth, at least, not fully h. By turning eighteen, Jake would have gained access to the Gender Identity Clinic on his own. He told me that he's going to get into university to please his parents. As the only child, he would need to fulfill certain family obligations. Gaining admittance into a university would allow him more leverage in coming out as a transgender person.

Lifetime

'It's not a miracle needle, you know. But it's close to it,' a veteran T-needle user told me. He took a sip of his coffee and

looked straight in my eye. 'I've never thought of it as something that I would be so dependent on. But it gives me strength. A kind of strength that comes with being my true self. I really didn't know about the power of the needle before. Many things changed for me afterwards. First, it's the way I look. My body has changed. It's easier to build up muscles. I feel stronger and stronger. Most importantly, I have more confidence in me. I feel like I am a legitimate man. I feel I can actually break out of my old shell and walk straight out into the world, a brand new world.'

He took another sip and looked away pensively at pedestrians walking by. We met in a small café in a suburban shopping mall. In his early forties, Ah Chong was dressed in a casual polo shirt with a slightly crumpled collar. He wore a few bracelets on both arms, thick and thin strings with crystals of different rounded shapes and colors. The colors of the crystal rocks were dazzling, catching the rays of sun reflected through shopping mall windows onto the coffee table. I pressed him further, 'What do you mean by your bodily changes? How has your life changed as a result of these changes?'

'I used to walk as if I had a hunched back. I walked in shadows. Didn't want to be noticed. I felt I would have to live my life in the dark. But starting hormones reversed it. The changes in my appearance were the most obvious. Honestly, the injections even changed my overall bone structure. I felt all of a sudden manly. I thought it would take a lifetime to be a man. But just starting with the needle, the process was accelerated, fast and unpredictable.'

'Unpredictable?'

'Yes, unpredictable because of its swiftness. My mindset also changed because I don't have to hide myself anymore. Some of my personal characteristics just flowed organically out into the open. I felt at ease with myself.'

'Do you mean you feel more like yourself?'

'Yes, like my life is getting back into form. In the past, there were many things that I didn't know how to handle. I didn't feel I had a grip on life. I didn't know how to get out of life's rut. I was very depressed.'

Ah Chong's eyes welled up and he looked away. Then he said to me, 'my mom would like to have food at that restaurant across from the street. Maybe I should take her there.'

Distance

Steve grew up in a single-parent family and has a very close relationship with his mother. He began his hormone therapy prior to getting a work visa to work in a remote town outside of Hokkaido, Japan. He remembered vividly his first experience of injecting the T needle by himself. Using hand gestures, he showed me over Zoom the body parts where he had injected the needle: the top of his thigh and his butt cheek. He told me that he had bruises in these areas because he failed so many times.

'The testosterone is oil-based, which means you have to be extra careful at injecting it into the muscles. Your hand cannot shake. You have to remain very still. The first time I put the needle into my thigh, I held it for more than thirty minutes because I wasn't sure if it was working! I couldn't walk the next day. My thigh was numb. Not painful but just numb. I had no idea why and I looked it up on the internet. It seems like others also have the same problem. So I'm relieved. I am still not good at shooting. But it gets better.'

The major problem for him is getting the appropriate medical supplies for his hormone therapy in Japan. Even though he is fluent in Japanese, it was difficult to find physicians who would understand his situation, especially with his foreigner status. As it is illegal to inject needles at home in Japan, he has to locate a doctor who would be understanding of his medical needs and willing to handle his T injections. Steve was extremely worried about his case, 'if I don't get regular injections, my voice will change, returning to a female voice, I'd look different, this cannot happen to me. I cannot let my co-workers know. They just knew me as a guy.' Steve's mother used to send him regular packages of T needles. He was used to injecting T by himself. The pandemic stopped the packages from arriving to his town. At the time of the interview, Steve found a doctor online who was willing to inject T needles for him but the clinic is based in Tokyo. He had to arrange for regular visits from Hokkaido to Tokyo to ensure that everything worked out.

Gauging Time

The T needle is an object that is acutely linked to a transgender man's organization of life.

It is an object that makes one socially recognizable as a man, even if it achieves partial results at the beginning. The needle and its attendant testosterone fix one's body up, building and stacking muscles on the way, providing contours that are often fitting of one's felt identity. Through regular injections, we learn to manipulate the timing of our bodies. Instead of racing against time, we are running over time, accelerating as each dosage of testosterone trails along blood streams, stimulating the growth of hair glands, building muscle tissues and redistributing fat throughout the body. The T needle is a challenge to time itself. It enhances, stimulates and accelerates time in a manner that allows Ah Chong to live life again. It enables Steve to have the social and cultural recognition that he needed in public. It remains a promise for adulthood as a trans man to Jake. The T needle is a tool to organize the timing of a body's transformation, the timing to face social worlds and eventually, the compressed progression of a past, present and future.

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