Bike-Body-Trail Assemblages

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Mountain Biking: a comparative approach in California and Austria on how riders’ experiences of body and landscape are attached to and enacted by (changing) leisure technologies.

This event followed the experimental character of the Science & Justice Working Group, as introduced by SJRC’s Co-Director Andrew Mathews, which emphasizes interdisciplinarity, discussion and questioning at any times. The panel reflected great diversity by including Wade Hall (shop owner and certified bike fitter at Spokesman Bicycles, Santa Cruz), Emilie Dionne (Postdoctoral Fellow at UCSC politics/feminist studies), and Robin Rae (PhD candidate Science & Technology Studies Univ. of Vienna, Scholar IHS Vienna). Participation of UCSC cycling team’s president Mark Tingwald added further valuable insights by bringing in a rider’s perspective. The material attendance of a special fitting bike from Wade, and Mark’s mountain bike and body helped to exemplify issues brought up in the event. With it being open to the public, attendants’ disciplinary backgrounds ranged from Engineering, Mathematics, and Physics to Sociology.

First, Robin offered a frame for the event by elaborating on the assemblage of bike, body, and trail. Highlighting the material heterogeneity in each of its components inevitably lead to outlining how entangled these are at the same time, affecting and enacting each other in specific ways. Presenting pictures of mountain bikes and local (unauthorized) trails in particular sparked up an early discussion on how political issues are involved in this assemblage and (local) riding practices.

Wade’s presentation was a captivating experience as it involved everyone and every body in the room to stand up and feel how different muscle groups are activated in varying postures. Making adjustments on the fit bike demonstrated how slight changes in the bike’s setup could affect the riding experience. Wade however also underlined how the fit needs to take into account how flexible and structurally strong the body is, for the bike to act as an extension of the body.
The far-reaching thinking of Emilie offered facets from material-political participation of the body entangled with objects, to personhood, and matter having agential capacities. Introducing her concept of the prosthesis, drawing on feminist theory of the dis-/abled body, opened up minds and eyes of many by referring to how mundane artifacts like chairs or steps affect material reality. With including the past in the body and regarding its materiality as plastic-like she further brought the dimension of time into the ongoing discussion.

The final open discussion was then extending the prior exchange of thoughts, experiences, and ideas, which took a dynamic of its own, not needing any initial questions. The mix of perspectives from different academic and non-academic fields contributed to an experience of mutual learning, leaving attendants with many things to think more about at meeting points of humans, non-humans, and landscapes.