Foreword

by Jan Willmann

The cultural and social revolution brought on by digital technology is rapidly transforming the world. We live in an era of accelerated change, in which data speeds invisibly around the globe and the flow of information has superseded physical exchange, whereas digital images, indexes and infrastructures have inscribed themselves within our recognizable aesthetic and material patterns.[1] In fact, information technology is reaching omnipresence, and at breathtaking speed.

Throughout this evocation, the human condition is constantly being redefined and translated into new synthetic constellations, blurring not only the lines between organism and machine, between human and technology, but also renewing attention to the body – which is being adjusted to an increasingly supple and volatile world and whose identities, relations and boundaries can be now measured, expanded and instrumentalized by the digital. As such, the body is radically recasting itself, evolving as an interface of reflection and experimentation, and ultimately being transferred into hybrid configurations between the real world and the various virtual worlds generated by informa-

1 Cf. Manuel Castells, The Rise of the Network Society, London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

tion technology. This, in turn, produces ideas of contrast and heterogeneity – the strong and the weak, the implicit and the explicit, the formed and the formless – and organizes the body as a (socio-technological) medium of inclusion and absorption, of recombination and admixture, of autonomy and multiplicity, of data and representation.

Against this shifting background, three challenges must be considered when rethinking the body in conjunction with data, with the digital, and with information technology in general. The first one is the intimate link that the emergence of information technology has with the reshaping of our traditional understanding of the body as an inert matter animated by a vital principal. In this, the whole physical world is translated through data and flows, which are abstracted in various configurations through information that can be constantly adapted and applied to the physical reality we inhabit. By establishing what Jean Baudrillard termed as *hyper-realities*, this fosters an array of virtual reconfigurations of the body, and, ultimately, defines the body as multi-dimensional, multi-relational condition. In turn, this also involves the transformation of the body towards new experiential dimensions of the physical world. For example, the pervasive presence of data and respective interfaces entails a significant redefinition of our codes of vision, through properties like zooming or localizing, but also of our digitally mediated approaches to hearing, touching, and moving. Through computational synthesis of odors and meals, smell and taste, we will be also concerned eventually by this process of perceptional redefinition. At another level, categories like texture, weight or inertia are also evolving rapidly at the interface of the virtual and the physical, and, consequently, transforming our very understanding of the body, and definitions such as experience, materiality and meaning.

The second challenge is the question of the individual. Nicholas Negroponte's book, *Being Digital*, was all about the importance given to individual preferences and choices in emergent digital networks and data flows[2]. Today,

2 Nicholas Negroponte, Being Digital, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, p. 37–50.

also the creative disciplines are becoming (again) increasingly concerned with individualization through information technology, like the renewed interest for the sensory dimension and above all the importance of the various interconnections established between social, cultural and political spheres. In many ways, as we will see in the second edition of the *Atlas of Databodies*, the contemporary individual must be interpreted in continuity with its environment – instead of being conceived as distinct from it. Questioning the separation between individual and environment, between human and non-human, between subject and object represents therefore one of the most constant features of contemporary digital culture, relating strongly to philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Gregory Bateson and Bruno Latour and their definitions of bodies, ecologies and networks that cannot be isolated from their surroundings, but appear rather in continuity with them. In such a mutually shaping (and even cybernetic) process, individualization has to be expanded by the concept of contextuality, whereas, just like folding and unfolding, the body can be interpreted as always mediating, procedural, and unstable.

On that scope, a third theme is the growing importance of occurrences, events and scenarios. Here, the pervasive presence of information technology is inseparable from the importance given to events of all sorts – real or virtual, deterministic or chaotic, scheduled or simply envisaged. This capacity has not only been substantially discussed across recent discourses but is rooted at a deeper level. According to Pierre Lévy, a bit of information is not a thing but an occurrence, or, in other words, a molecular event.[3] It corresponds to something that happens rather than something that is following traditional ontological categories. Consequently, this fosters a temporal, event-like and performative approach, whereas actors, networks and occurrences are everywhere, from algorithmic simulations on computer screens to global finance networks. Today's creative disciplines are therefore no longer supposed to convey a message distinct from the affects generated by them. Therefore, they are probably better understood in the light of these occurrences, paying attention to their aesthetic and performative agency – or, as Paul Virilio has put it in one of his essays: The world is more and more about »ce qui arrive«, what happens.[4]

3 Pierre Lévy, La Machine Univers: Création, Cognition et Culture Informatique, Paris: La Découverte, 1987, p. 124–125.

4 Cf. Paul Virilio, Ce qui arrive, Paris: Galilée, 2002.

Although these challenges open new and enthralling possibilities to redefine the relationship between the body and the digital, the reshaping of our experience of the world, the increasing importance given to the individual, and the accent put on events are also synonymous with disquieting (post-human) perspectives. An exclusive focus on body and data, on materiality and sensorium can become a dead-lock. In a more and more individualized society, collective systems of value may prove difficult to preserve. Paradoxically, saturated with events of all kinds, we tend to loose the sense of substantial change and vibrant forces[5], as if the past or the singular do not matter any more and the only future to be expected is the intensification of what is obvious and already exists. These dangers of concurrent data politics – and their bodily internalizations and externalizations – are present in digitally-produced experiences and environments with the temptation to focus on the satisfaction of the senses and fulfillment of programs dictated by global capitalism without ever questioning their limitations. This allegedly realistic attitude, sometimes characterized as ›post-critical‹, has led artists, designers, architects, planners and others to relinquish political consciousness in order to fully embrace the conditions of their time. But can they live only in the present, oblivious of the past and indifferent to the promises of a different future? And can the creative disciplines survive being deprived of memory and matter, and without the ambition to make the world a truly different place? The most pressing challenges awaiting the creative disciplines perhaps has to do with the need to overcome this attitude, and to think (and act) in political and social terms again. Perhaps the time has come to reinvent sense and sensuality, mind and matter, experience and utopia, and with that the forsaken ideal of the body.

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5 Cf. Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.