

Foreword

by Alexandra Toland

The year 2020 began with a global reckoning. Bodies were getting sick. Surgical masks on the faces of strangers and in the waste streams of cities became a ubiquitous reminder of an uncertain future. The spread of COVID-19 drastically deepened and at the same time exposed the racial, ethnic, gender, and economic inequalities of contemporary societies across the globe. The sickness blurred previously demarcated borders between bodies, households, nations, and species – elderly family members were separated from loved ones by plastic curtains and digital screens; regulations were introduced to determine how many members of different families could gather and which citizens from which nations were permitted to travel; minks infected by their human farmers were executed by the millions; for a short time, bats and pangolins took the blame for human suffering. The representation of the spread of COVID-19 was (at least) twofold: narratives of sickness and death in various media on the one hand and a steady stream of data on the other. Corona apps were rolled out for individual users, regional and global tracking systems announced up-to-date information on the spread of the virus, digital dashboards were developed to visualise daily and weekly numbers of new positive cases and deaths, and epidemiological concepts such as »incidence rates« and »flattening the curve« became household knowledge.

Given this backdrop, the Atlas of Databodies seeks out to examine the intimate relationships between bodies and data, taking note of historical critiques of biopolitical mechanisms as well as the surge to develop new mechanisms to aid struggling health systems and the bodies they serve. Bringing together an interdisciplinary mix of students and researchers from the departments of art and design, architecture and urban studies, and media at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, as well as other internationally renowned artists and scholars, the Atlas project asked: what methods of measuring and imaging the human body are available, and what new methods can be imagined? What kinds of data are collected from human (and nonhuman) bodies and how are these represented, or potentially misrepresented and manipulated? Who owns or has access to biometric data? What influence do visualisations of biological data have on humans' understanding of their own and collective bodies, especially in times of a pandemic? And what tools for bodily measurement and mapping could be developed to speculate alternative forms of representation and societal critique?

To say that publication's editors were well poised to take on such questions would be an understatement. The designer Johannes Breuer works on digital health apps for various health conditions, while visual artist Marlene Bart analyses the collection methods of atlases and encyclopaedias in natural history collections. Both are researchers in the practice-based doctoral program for art and design at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. For the present publication, they have collaborated with their colleague Alex Leo Freier, a doctoral candidate at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Trained in psychology and philosophy, he is currently researching the epistemology of images. In cooperation with the Futurium Lab in Berlin and invited guests, Breuer, Bart, and Freier have assembled a thought-provoking collection of critical reflections on the potentialities of both bodies as data and data bodies.

These visualisation prototypes and collected essays remind us that data is fluid and complex, no matter how matter-of-factly they are represented. A self-monitoring app, digital fingerprint or temperature reading only reveal a fraction of the body's changing needs as possible sources of data. As I write this foreword, I sense the place in my throat and nostrils of a COVID-19 antigen test I was required to take just hours earlier. The result of the test could only be one of two possibilities – positive or negative. My bodily discomfort and subdued apprehension were not parameters meant to be tested. I belong to that intersection set of people who is both vaccinated and healed. But the psychological impact of losing my sense of smell to the sickness already ten months ago can barely be captured in any form of data collection – and for whom? Citing apocalyptic narratives of the Japanese manga and anime genres, Gabriel S Moses, in his essay for this volume, notes that »sickness is never binary. It is a spectacular spiritual metaphor that encompasses the tragedy, drama and comedy of the human condition in pursuit of surpassing it.« Inspired by Gabriel S Moses's essay, Martin Šálek's temperature map, and Eirini Kokkinidou's breath interpretation sculpture, I dream of a pre- and post-COVID smell map for navigating the rose gardens of the world, perhaps embedded in the ubiquitous surgical masks I still continue to wear.

The global reckoning that began in 2020 continues to challenge us today. While sickness has historically been juxtaposed by normative visualisations of health, COVID-19 has challenged us to seek out empathy, diversity, and unpredictability in data dashboards of all kinds. The Atlas of Databodies maps out insightful responses to the question of how biodata is produced, represented, and challenged in the shadow of the pandemic, with both pragmatic and poetic considerations that weave together art, design, and technology into prototypes and theory-driven thought experiments. What the reader takes away is not only a speculative atlas but tools for reckoning.

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