

MATTER

journal of new materialist research

Universitat de Barcelona

BOOK REVIEW
7TH ISSUE

A Plea for “Bodyfulness”: Book Review of the Atlas of Databodies I (eds. Bart, Breuer, Freier)

Una súplica por la "consciencia del cuerpo": Reseña del libro Atlas de Databodies I (eds. Bart, Breuer, Freier)

Una súplica per a la "corpositat": revisió del llibre de l'Atlas de Databodies I (eds. Bart, Breuer, Freier)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v7i1.42254>

Recommended citation:

Martach, Swantje (2023). A Plea for “Bodyfulness”: Book Review of the Atlas of Databodies I (eds. Bart, Breuer, Freier). *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, 7, 93-97. University of Barcelona. <https://doi.org/>



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For long understood in dichotomy to the soul, mind, and reason, the body has been belittled within theory as well as practical self- (see Richter in atlas p. 48f.) and other-conception (see atlas contribution “Artificial Tears”, p. 116f.). We have just recently rebegun to theorize the fact that literally every experience we make and every action we take (even the most mental and abstract ones, e.g. thinking) is dependent on our bodies (see Johnson, 2007). Yet seeing it ‘merely’ as the material part of the self, we tend to subjugate bodies. We use bodies, our own and others’, for work and leisure, pain and pleasure. We use bodies, but we seldom take account of them. During most actions, bodies are ready-to-hand and never thought about as such. By paradoxical implication, we perceive bodily actions to be ‘body-less’. When cooking, we think about the ingredients, the resulting dish, the pots and pans; but we do not think about how we are to pose and move our body in order to be able to cook (see Rünker’s atlas contribution, p. 18f.). When dressing, we think about the weather, the occasion, the outfit combination; but we do not think about the bodily actions necessary for dressing (i.e. ducking, jumping, sitting down and standing up). When working (these days: remotely), we are glued to our computers, entangled in emails and presentations, and observant of other tiny heads appearing on our screens during conference calls; but we hardly ever become reflectively aware of the role our bodies take in the meantime. An intent to make bodies re-gain an active and thus important role in the age of teleworking are the geometric eggs presented in the atlas contribution by Held (p. 74f.).

Often enough, we care too little about our bodies. It affords much discipline to do sports on a regular basis — discipline that we already depleted in the construction and inhabitation of our professional and medial selves. It consumes a lot of (shopping, storing, preparing, cleaning) time to nourish our body healthily — time that we never have in this accelerated world. In a crucial phase of a project, we subordinate sleep to the latter’s finalization. And for many of us, the thrill of living with inspiring people in the city is more important than breathing the countryside’s fresh air on a daily basis. In the atlas, based on a design approach that is located “at” the body, Rückeis

and Thurow present their “amphibolic objects”: Objects that avoid any single definition of their purpose, and rather are made to explore always other handlings, whereby they intend to incite new and autologous ways of bodying. In this way, they offer us help in re-converging (a new materialist kind of “re-”) with our bodies (see p. 128ff).

We thus subjugate bodies to our personal, often mental, rational, professional, spiritual aspirations. And bodies allow us to subjugate them — certainly up to a certain point, where they make themselves present, push to the forefront of our awareness by their specific means of dysfunction: being sick. Bodies indeed have their methods to make us see their limits. Yet today, there are drugs to supersede these, at least in the short run. The step from a body’s use to its abuse, personified in the Nazi-dentist in Bart’s and Breuer’s atlas contribution “Is it safe?” (p. 92f.), here appears to be tiny.

But let us remain in the wide spectrum of subjugated-yet-functioning bodies, that permit us to conceive them as means for ever other ends. I claim that precisely in this too-easily-taken-for-granted admittance lies the body’s peculiar power: In and by functioning, bodies withdraw from us. Given that bodies function for us, namely while we function via them, the body can be conceptualized as the “object” (which Harman defines by means of its “riff” from/in reality, Harman, 2007, p. 193) par excellence, and thus becomes a primary matter for speculative theories (to which I count new materialism): The body is the object we always carry with us, the object as and through which we exist.

In this sense, its functioning can be understood as the strategy a body implies in order to secretly act back on us, to cunningly condition our conceptions and very pragmatically shape our movements. Already in biblical terms, the body was ‘the flesh’, yet precisely as such, so I argue, the body always is “a little bit nasty” (see Bart discussing the art of Mathisrud, atlas p. 100f.), always at risk of “drowning in its own materiality” (see Freier writing about Swanson’s art, atlas p. 164). As clean as it might be, and as sleek as it might be (medially) presented, the functioning body retains what Braidotti would

call a “teratological” potential (Braidotti, 2000), viz. a chance to disobey, to become disgusting, to reveal its cyborg-nature (in the way Haraway defined it, see Haraway, 2016). In moments in which a body exploits this power, whether we witness it or not, it truly lives up to its own existence, viz. it literally is ‘body-ing’.

To draw attention to works attending to bodies in their withdrawal, and the withdrawing of bodies, is the driving force of the bilingual Atlas of Databodies I [original German title: Atlas der Datenkörper I], edited by visual artist Marlene Bart, designer and design researcher Johannes Breuer, and philosopher/psychologist Alex Leo Freier. At the side, the present review dares to introduce the Atlas only now, so late in this text, as it believes a structure in which the reader gets hit by the matter (here: the body) before being handed over the form (here: the atlas) as a scaffold for judgment (until now, the review’s title had to suffice the reader for the latter purpose), to correspond most to the new materialist manner of thought.

The impetus that unites all contributions presented in the Atlas, which are written by a variety of authors including artists, designers, curators, photo- and scenographers, (digital) architects, engineers, philosophers, neuroscientists, taxidermists, and anthropologists, is to not counter or impede, but to rather watch and learn about the body’s withdrawal. And the strategy they use is to think the body not anymore as means for ends, but as an end in and for itself. The Atlas of Databodies I hence comes down to a plea to be mindful, namely of the body, whereby the Buddhist-turned-esoteric-commonsense concept of ‘mindfulness’ becomes congruent to what could be called a ‘bodyfulness’.

However crucially, the Atlas nowhere arrogates for itself to capture the body in its fullness. As initiation of a series, the Atlas I rather sets out to register the richness of the body’s enactments and entanglements (in and with the digital), which validates the atlas itself as a suitable method (introduced by the editors, see p.10-11) for a research of bodies.

The Atlas of Databodies has its focus not on bodies as they have been or historically became, but on bodies in the here and now,

especially their speculations (situated not only in the future). In the present age, which paradoxically is at the same time all the less bodily (rather: digital, mental, computerized) while being all the more bodily (aesthetic, cultic, fanatic), I see bodies as more complex than ever before: In addition to continuing their intra-actions with the social, the environmental, the medicinal, the architectural, the temporal, etc., today, bodies are also digital. Attending to bodies-as-ends might thus have never been more urgent.

And the Atlas’ claim is not just: Bodies create and nourish data. But thinking the body as end, it also states: Bodies are shaped by data. Very new materialist in style, it thus circularly concludes: Bodies produce data produce bodies. Reading it less evaluative than Freier and rather plainly ontological, Swanson’s artwork “Repent” (p. 165), interpreted by Freier as a self-consuming Ouroboros (see p. 164), hence is felicitously located at the Atlas’ provisional end.

Data here become just another body liquid, effluent like saliva, blood, or urine. And we become another, dependent upon the data that our bodies produce, that are constantly collected, interpreted, and used against/for us by an Other (digital capitalism), and that flow (not ‘back’) into and alter what we used to call ‘selves’. For this reason, Lee and Holzheu write: “people become organs of a larger body” (p. 156), and “Data and databases ... have entangled us in a way biopolitics could never have” (p. 160). Not the result, but the ever only temporary halts in which databodies become manifest are what Freier cautionary calls “branded bodies” (p. 170).

The danger of data, streaming directly from the term’s etymology (plural of Lat. datum, “a given”), is that they erroneously make the body appear as a fixed fact, while the body rather is constitutively open, always in the making, ontologically becoming — apparently a commonsense for the atlas in discussion. It bravely engages in a play with this danger by entangling “data” with/in the neologism “databodies”, whereby both data and bodies are intra-actively becoming an/other.

It could be said that the Atlas of Databodies I seeks to stress the need to conceptualize the body not as a datum in data, but to rather take this verb out of its past participle form (datum) and back into its infinitive (which by no way is neutral): the Latin dare (“to give”), from which the English term “to dare” derived. It says: Let us take our bodies to dare (bodies as means, at times, yes). Let us dare our bodies in order to become (take the body as end), namely what Deleuze and Guattari called “rhizomatic” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 13) bodies: “Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, talking with your tongue, thinking with your brain [...]? Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly” (ibid., p. 167). Let us allow our bodies to dare (allowing the body to become means for its own ends). Let us exist as daring bodies (queering mind/body in their fullness).

So why should new materialists engage with this atlas? Attending precisely the matter that is (not exclusively) us, the Atlas of Databodies I reveals the body as vividly mattering, even slobberingly mattering since becoming a databody. In so doing, the Atlas queers the methods of art and research, contributes to the re-appreciation of our own ordinary (a feminist endeavor), and eventually releases us in awe of

present-day’s multiplicities of becoming — “taught to those who dare to see” (Freier p. 170, italics added).

What could be done more? Databodies are matrices consisting of their entanglements with/in multiple practices. Some of them have already been approached in the Atlas I, and I hope to see differing approaches in a (already announced by calling the book “Atlas I”) coming Atlas II, such as, and here I openly propose: dance and trance, (4D-)transportation, databody/sex, ‘datasports’, “cyborg fashion” (see already atlas-included artist Amy Karle’s (p.22f.) latest exhibition in Kuwait), and postmodern medicines. For its self-legitimation in the body as a field of study, I suggest a second atlas to further couple with (as initiated by Richter p. 48f.) state-of-the-art embodiment theories and/in the philosophies of mind. And in a new materialist direction, I would welcome to follow further conceptual work on queering the body/mind.

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