

Unquantifiable Bodies in the Age of Algorithms

Jaime del Val¹

(presented in 2019 at the Quantification of Bodies conference in Coimbra)

Abstract: Firstly I will propose a critical history/genealogy of how the body became quantifiable since antiquity to Big Data and Autonomous Algorithms, through my theory of the Algoricene or Age of Algorithms, and its current problematic expansion in a society of hypercontrol. Secondly I propose a philosophical redefinition of the body as fundamentally unquantifiable, via a new movement philosophy, and a new theory of perception grounded on proprioception (the body's sense of internal movement) and swarming, which opposes the legacy of fixed points of vision of the Renaissance, while claiming this irreducible nature of the body as both a creative force of evolution and a resistance to the reductive tendencies of all-encompassing measurement in contemporary hypercontrol society. Finally I will do an exposition of my own art-activism practices that enact such an irreducible body, in particular in relation to the EU project METABODY - www.metabody.eu.

Keywords: proprioception, body intelligence, flocking, field theory, movement philosophy

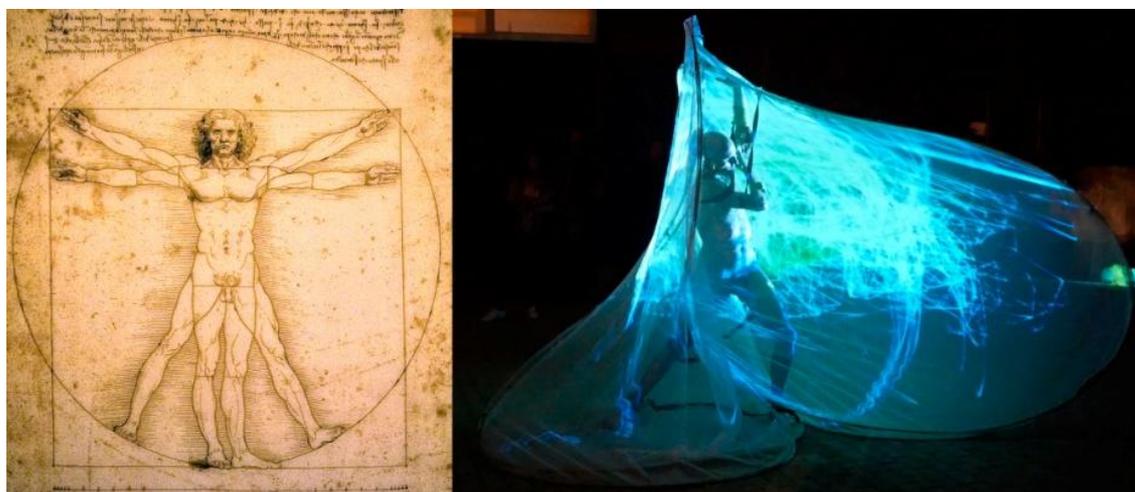


Fig 1: Leonardo's Vitruvian Man and Jaime del Val's Metatopia performance.

How the body became quantifiable – The Algoricene

¹Jaime del Val
Reverso/Metabody Institute, Madrid.
E-mail: jaimedelval@metabody.eu

In my theory of the Algoricene or Age of Algorithms (Val, 2017a, b, c, d), I propose that over millennia a planetary scale field of geometric relations has gradually emerged in which movement has become increasingly aligned, segmented, coded, both in sovereign and disciplinary normativities and in digital control. The very possibility to quantify reality is an effect of this process of reduction and alignment of movement and perception. This process reaches a first culmination with the invention of linear perspective in the Renaissance, where the fixed point of vision introduced an unprecedented hierarchy of the senses and of immobility, radically undermining the much richer spectrum of multisensory, proprioceptive and kinesthetic plasticity of bodies.

A world of bodies choreographed in fixed points of vision gradually emerged, underlying and unfolding in colonialism, mechanism and rationalism. Anatomy, profiling of behaviors, and reduction of the body to a quantifiable abstract materiality, both as biological bounded entity and in terms of its behaviors, is entirely grounded on the onto-epistemologies of the fixed point of vision.

Thus the very possibility to quantify bodies is grounded on the radical reduction and alignments of bodies' movements and perception through the fixed point of vision of perspective.



Fig. 2: Engraving by Albrecht Dürer showing a perspective machine, ca. 1525 (OASC, Public Domain - Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Current interfaces still operate reducing our kinesthetic spectrum through fixed points of vision and sensing that measure bodies by reducing their movement. This reduction is also the means by which algorithms in planetary scale computation systems can not only measure but also reorient our behaviors.

Why the body is unquantifiable – Radical Movement Philosophy

But the fixed point of vision is an extraordinary anomaly in terms of how bodies move, perceive and relate to one another: in terms of multisensory integration and proprioception. In my Radical Movement Philosophy I propose to develop a different account of perception grounded on proprioception, the body's sense of its own movement.

Proprioception, as described already by Sherrington in 1906, is a field perception, where the body senses the fluctuations of force distribution across all its tissues. I propose that this is in fact the archetypal mode of perception in movement fields, including, cellular, bacterial, molecular or even inorganic, but also psychic, social or technical fields. For instance cells can sense their surroundings by applying force to sense a medium. Slime molds sense through highly complex rhythms of chemical oscillations running through their ameboid plasmodial bodies. This is also largely how we sense the world: as we move in relation to something we sense the world in the same act of sensing ourselves, through our internal force distributions as capacities/opportunities for action, and always in motion, in transformation, in reciprocal reattunement with the surroundings, which is part of the field that we are.

I call this arché-proprioception, as the archetypal mode of perception proper to fields. This is related to my reconceptualization of movement, not as displacement, but as field, as fluctuations composing relations, internally and in relation to other fields. Every body is already a field, or *metabody*.

Fluctuation is the ontological primary of the universe, following contemporary cosmology and Quantum Field Physics. The entire universe or even multiverses are expressions of quantum fluctuations: indeterminate energy density differentials. I propose a field theory of movement based on this premise, where fluctuations infold and unfold: differentials within differentials and across differentials, which enfold the process of increasing variation that is evolution, as long as there is *balance between the openness of fluctuation and the consistency of fields coming up in it*.

I approach this field nature of movement through anew account of the swarm, as relations of rhythm, orientation and contact. Every movement field swarms with diverse rhythms, orientations and contacts: from bacterial colonies or gravitational fluctuations, to neural swarms and planetary scale fields of algorithms.

A movement field is ontologically indeterminate and unquantifiable because it sustains endless states at the same time: the fluctuations of my proprioceptive field are irreducible to a trajectory, and lie in the multiple sustained tensions and fluctuations going on in the body even as I pretend to be still: it is ontologically indeterminate, just like subatomic quantum phenomena.

However some fields break the balance of consistency and openness reducing openness in favour of an excessive consistency that blocks the

movement of variation of evolution and needs to be overcome. This is the case of the Algoricene or Age of Algorithms.

Bodies as a priori fluctuating fields are irreducible to quantification, since quantification relates itself to one particular type of highly aligned geometric movement field where movements reduce its swarming indeterminacy.

This reduction is related to domination and is an evolutionary problem that needs to be overcome. Livable lives need to sustain the unfolding of fluctuation as increasing variation. Dominant reductive alignments disrupt this process by imposed and "order" that blocks evolution.

How to mobilise the unquantifiable body – Disalignments and Ontohacking techniques

Sustaining a balance between openness and consistency, and restoring this balance after millennia of reductive alignments and atrophy requires techniques, improvisation techniques that unfold the ongoing variation in movement.

Since around 2001 I develop techniques to unfold an irreducible body that resists reduction to dominant alignments. The core of these techniques is in what I call disalignments (Val 2015a): the possibility to unfold the body's capacity for ongoing variation, in the endless combinatory of its 360 joints. This implies mobilising what I call BI, Body Intelligence as non-rationally guided, self-organising, swarming capacity of the body to unfold its proprioceptive and multisensory integration potentials. BI and the proprioceptive swarm are two key concepts for this proposal.

How we move is how we think, feel, perceive and relate. The more narrow our movements the more narrow our thoughts, perceptions, affects and worlds. By introducing greater plasticity in our movements-perceptions we can radically open up our realities, but this is proposed through mobilising a subtle ongoing variation: the sustained capacity to vary and open up to new movements, torsions of the proprioceptive field of the body, compositions with other bodies. I call this ontohacking, as the capacity to find always new ways of moving and reinventing ourselves and our relation to everything including any reductive technology.

Over the years these techniques have unfolded into various practices that cultivate the plasticity in movement. In the METABODY (Val 2015 e) project I condense most of my research and creation processes in the arts, but also in therapy and life techniques that mobilise the irreducible complexity of bodies, movement and perception. These practices can take form of a workshop and also a performance-installation or experiential *metaformance* (Val 2015f).



Fig. 3: METATOPIA – Metaformance b in Toulouse 2016, MetabodyForum (© Jaime del Val. Photo: Reverso)

In the project *Microsexes* (Val 2015d) I subvert the technology of the camera in order to mobilise a post-anatomical amorphous body irreducible to categories of binary sex. In the project *Amorphogenesis* (Val 2015c) I subvert gaming and control aesthetics by creating an amorphous architecture in constant emergence where the richer the variations of torsions in the interactor's proprioception the richer the field created. *Flexinamics* (Val 2015 b) in turn proposes physical architectures that mutate unpredictably in relation to the body's proprioception and movement.



Fig. 4: MICROSEXES – Metaformance by Jaime del Val, Madrid 2014, Metabody Forum (© Jaime del Val. Photo: Reverso)

In times of COVID-19, where the already preexisting tendency to become immobile bodies clicking on screens and subject to digital surveillance is exponentially accelerated, its more urgent than ever counteract reduction with an anti-reductive move, to regain the swarming plasticity of bodies impoverished through millennia of atrophy and alignments. Not in AI, but in BI, Body intelligence, we have the chance for an evolutionary leap, and for a movement r/evolution.

References

- Sherrington, Charles. S. 1906. *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Val, Jaime del. 2009. Undoing anatomy: Resisting Global Choreographies in Capitalism of Affects. *GRAMMA –Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 19, 265-278.
- Val, Jaime del. 2016. Metahuman. Post-anatomical bodies, Metasex, and the Capitalism of Affect in Post-posthumanism. In: Deretic & S. L. Sorgner (Eds.), *From Humanism to Meta-, Post- and Transhumanism?*, 347-357). Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Val, Jaime del. 2017[a]. Algoricene. Genealogy, Ontology, Aesthetics and Politics of Algorithmic Life, from the Ancient World to BigData. In *ISEA 2017 Proceedings*, 800. [available online] <http://www.isea-archives.org/docs/2017/proceedings/ISEA2017Proceedings.pdf>
- Val, Jaime del. 2017[b]. Algoriceno. Ecologías mayores y menores en la era del Big Data. In *ILIA. Debates sobre la Investigación en Artes*, 48-61. Guayaquil: UArtes Ediciones. [available online] <http://www.uartes.edu.ec/institucional/index.php/download/ilia/?wpdmdl=1666&masterkey=59e7ea85dae70>
- Val, Jaime del. 2017[c]. Hypermemory and micromemories in the algoricene: on memory, borders and healing. In *VIRUS*, 15. [e-journal] [online] Available at: <http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus15/?sec=4&item=4&lang=en>.
- Val, Jaime del. 2018. Ontohacking. Ontoecological politics in the Algoricene. In *LEONARDO*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 187-188.
- Val, Jaime del. 2015a. *Disalignments*. Website. <https://metabody.eu/disalignments>
- Val, Jaime del. 2015b. *Flexinamics*. Website. <https://metabody.eu/flexinamics>
- Val, Jaime del. 2015c. *Amorphogenesis*. Website. <https://metabody.eu/amorphogenesis>
- Val, Jaime del. 2015d. *Microsexes*. Website. <https://metabody.eu/microsexes>
- Val, Jaime del. 2015e. *Metatopia*. Website. <https://metabody.eu/metatopia>
- Val, Jaime del. 2015f. *Metabody*. Website. <https://metabody.eu>