

GOING BEYOND THE BODY?

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BODY

When publishing this peculiar drawing over a century ago, the physicist Ernst Mach invoked the body to constrain the claims of abstract reasoning: “I step out of the domain of physics into that of physiology or psychology,” he commented, when “element[s] . . . within my field of vision [pass] through my skin.” To Mach’s dyad of physiology and psychology, we might add the person-making domains of aesthetic experience. For when we attempt to analyze or simulate sensation beyond the body, we are thrown back on those packages of skin, viscera, water-soluble chemicals, and electrical impulses that produce our consciousness—sensations firing in patterns that, so far, have been far more accurately interpreted by culture than by science.

There is no “going beyond the body” in my argument. Yet that body—a place of silence and rumblings, translucence and dark interiors, folds and hidden openings—is not invoked here to end discussion (a politico-academic commonplace); rather, “body” is the necessary term with which to begin in navigating embodied experience in new media art. “My body differs from other human bodies,” asserts Mach “by the circumstance that it is only seen piecemeal, and, especially, is seen without a head.”¹ Even this body of

mine, which types at the computer keyboard so compliantly, this body that I “possess” and “command,” is apprehended only in fragments and pieces; only the humming of a thousand sensations creates the illusion of my unity. As the history of human artifacts confirms, the fragility of that illusion



Fig. 1.

1. Ernst Mach, *Contribution to the Analysis of Sensations* [1897] (New York: Dover, 1959), sec. 9.

图1：马赫，图1源自 *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen* (1886)，译本为《感觉分析的贡献》(*Contribution to the Analysis of Sensations*)，芝加哥，1897年版。Figure 1: Ernst Mach, Figure 1 from his *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen* (1886), translated as *Contribution to the Analysis of Sensations* (Chicago 1897).



图2: Mariana Rondon, *You Came with the Breeze* 《随风飘来的你》。
Figure 2: Mariana Rondon *You Came with the Breeze*.

makes us turn to other bodies. For millennia, we have been compulsively figuring animals, people, and gods in search of some confirmation that we are whole, intact, and belong to something larger than ourselves. I know that such confirmation can never be vouchsafed by my own limited body; I must seek it elsewhere: in the face of the other, in representations, in simulacra.

The seductions of media begin here.

Vast membranes glimmer into being—amoeboid shapes bounded like bodies, but wildly irregular, asymmetric, monstrous. An eye appears, or a bird; organs or limbs—sometimes the creatures merge, forming mythical beings. Machines whirl and clank in service of these biocentric apparitions. Yet just as quickly as this “life” emerged, quickening before our eyes, it expires: cinematic film on soap film, these evanescent apparitions “live” only in our minds, never to be exactly repeated. All this is part of Mariana Rondon’s installation *You Came with the Breeze*. The pleasures of such open trickery revolve around our understanding that this is a simulation of a simulation: the generation of what Rondon calls “non-existent luminous spirits, illusions formed in the collective imagination,” created to spur our thoughts about the literal chimeras emerging from the bioengineering firms of our time. Those pig-gene salmon on our plates,

or jellyfish-gene strawberries in our fridge, have their chimerical sides hidden under a veneer of business-as-usual. Rondon’s art attempts to reveal the monstrous bodies lurking beneath our wonderful creativity—the Faustian bargain we make in going “beyond the body” to probe its inner genotype for human gain. Beyond this, the simple mechanics of her installation remind us of the continuity of illusions that put the “life” in artificial life and the “intelligence” in artificial intelligence. In the perfected Turing test, only the omniscient observer outside the system can know which is the human, and which the simulated human response.² But in Rondon’s air-driven simulations of engineered bio-matter, it is the viewer who is given the grace of temporary omniscience to see the soul in the machine.

CAVE

Like Turing’s test, part of the power of Rondon’s layered simulation (artificial simulation of artificial life) comes from its constraining conditions: the black-box darkness from which so much contemporary art glimmers forth. It is no accident that “the cave” was the first site for permanent art-making and the first paradigm of virtual reality—or that it is the latest phase of contemporary art’s attack on the hallowed white cube. The cave produces a dark fold in the mass of the real, into which we may put our bodies to withdraw from the world of action. What are the motives for this sequestration? To shelter from the storm, to hear stories by a flickering fire, to voyage within. Many of the media works on display in *Synthetic Times* draw on this fruitfully constraining construct of the cave: the marks that come into light from the darkened substrate of the Blendid Collective’s *Touch Me*, the voids that float behind anthromorphs in Kurt Hentschläger’s *Karma*, the darkened background from which the “clones” emerge into Dr. Du’s operating theater—and of course, the ultimate cave of the sepulcher, in etoy’s “Mission Eternity” sarcophagus, which we enter to inhabit the living data of the deceased.