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Title

Too H±man: Qualifying the Image of the Body in Design

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Abstract

The human body in design reflects more than form; it embodies shifting paradigms of perception, measurement, and self-engagement. Traditional approaches often assume a “Universal Body,” a standardized norm that overlooks diversity and the entanglements of humans with natural, artificial, and technological systems. This essay challenges such conventions by examining how quantification has shaped body images and influenced the desire to understand, control, and modify ourselves through numbers.

Central to this discussion is self-tracking as a design methodology. By translating bodily phenomena into data, self-tracking allows the body to be both measured and qualified, offering a more nuanced perspective on human experience. The Quantified Self movement illustrates both the potential and the limitations of numerical representation in fostering individualized and reflexive understandings of embodiment.

Ultimately, this perspective repositions human agency at the centre of design, moving beyond static norms toward context-sensitive, participatory approaches that recognize the body as both actor and interface.

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Introduction

The image of the human body plays a pivotal role in shaping both design theory and practice, profoundly influencing how we create and interpret the world around us. Some of these images are socially imposed, others shaped through individual and collective experience. In design, such images are often codified into conventions, most notably the so-called *Universal Body* standard, which enforces normative assumptions about what is typical, ideal, or desirable. Critically examining this standard opens possibilities for design to better engage with human diversity and resist exclusionary norms.

Historically, design quantified the body through measurements for representation, ergonomics, or standardization. These practices produced prescriptive images that constrained individuality and often dictated experience, revealing a persistent tension between rigid standards and the body's inherent complexity, variability, and situatedness.

The body is not fixed; it is continuously reshaped through interactions with natural, artificial, and technological environments. This perspective foregrounds questions of self-design and agency, exploring where the self ends and the world begins, and revealing the entanglements between *Body-Image*, both its physical and mental forms, and design practices that both reflect and reinforce social norms.

Practices like self-tracking, long used to monitor the body, have become more accessible through digital tools. These tools offer individuals new ways to reclaim agency through the very numbers that once constrained them. Movements such as the *Quantified Self* hint at how data can help people explore the body and self in relation to their environment. Just as systems measuring bodies once normalized individuals, quantification has historically imposed limits. Today, however, these same tools open possibilities for reflection and a subtle form of resistance, suggesting that numbers also become instruments of agency.

This study builds upon a wide range of established ideas and research from biology, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and anthropology, all of which will be carefully examined in the following sections. Its primary contribution, however, lies in bringing these perspectives together within the context of design, addressing who we are, and what we hope to become.

1. The Constructs of the Body-Image

This chapter examines the historical evolution of *Body-Image* in design, tracing the shift from human-centred ideals to quantified and normalized representations. It explores how quantification, assigning numerical values to the human body, has both enabled and constrained design, reflecting cultural biases and shaping societal norms. From 15th-century human representation to

20th-century industrialization, this chapter situates the body within a long trajectory of measurement, visualization, and standardization.

Quantification may be understood as the act of attributing numerical values to measurements, essentially counting the quanta of whatever one observes. While this approach has proven invaluable in the natural sciences and economics, it becomes contentious when applied to social entities, which are inherently fluid. For instance, the quantification of categories such as ethnicities and gender, or in the case of this study, "human bodies", can be problematic, as it risks oversimplification, exclusion, and bias.

THE QUANTIFIED PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD

Humanity has long positioned itself at the centre of perception, presupposing a sense of closeness and unity with the universe. This perspective is *anthropocentric*: humans interpret and assign meaning to the world relative to their own experience. Leonardo da Vinci's *On the Treatise of Vitruvius* (Book III, Chapter 1) illustrates how the human body serves as a measuring tool for architecture, with units such as digits, palms, and cubits defining proportions and guiding the scale of buildings (da Vinci, 1517/2003).

Similarly, the German astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler (1599) argued that numbers and magnitudes are the primary means by which the human mind apprehends the world, suggesting a quantitative lens akin to divine understanding (Koesler, 1964, pp. 535-611). These examples highlight the early link between human proportion, measurement, and design practice.

Architecture provides a classic example of humans stamping the world with their seal. Despite the contradictions associated with anthropocentrism, it has been strongly adopted in architecture as a form of thought and argumentative support. The human body was frequently used as a model for architecture, and both the body and building were metaphorically transcribed through proportions, measurements, and abstracted geometric representations.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE HUMAN BODY

The turn toward quantitative measurement was neither smooth nor inevitable. Visualization played a crucial role: as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga noted, "Thought takes the form of visual images. Really to impress the mind a concept has first to take visible shape" (Huizinga, 1954, p. 284). Quantification and measurement were thus not only tools for mathematicians and astronomers but also essential for architects, sculptors, and painters illustrating corporeality over the centuries.

In the fifteenth century, Vitruvius' *De Architectura* (Book II, Preface) established the human body as a model of proportion

for architectural design, positing that a well-proportioned temple should reflect the perfection of the human form. Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* visualized this ideal of *L'Uomo Universale* (Figure 01), showing the span of a man's outstretched arms equal to his height and inscribing the body within a circle and square (Da Vinci, 1517/2003, pp. 213-214). Proportional canons extended beyond Europe, from the 18–19-unit grid of ancient Egypt (Figure 02) to Indian *Purusha Mandala* diagrams (Figure 03), which linked human proportions to space and cosmology.

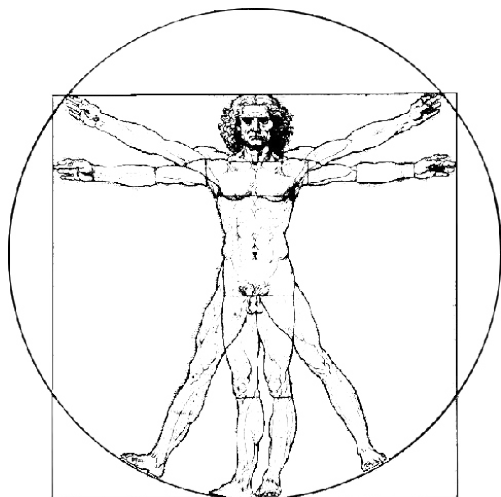


Figure 01. The Vitruvian Man, drawing made by the Italian polymath Leonardo da Vinci, ca. 1490.

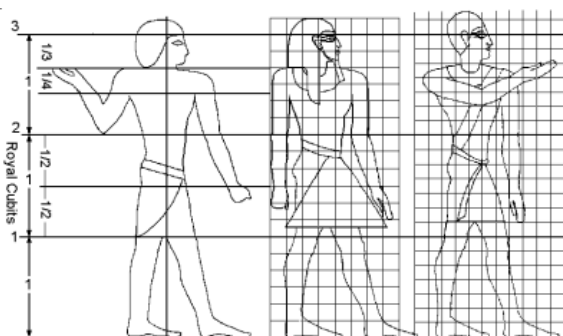


Figure 02. The Egyptian Grid System.

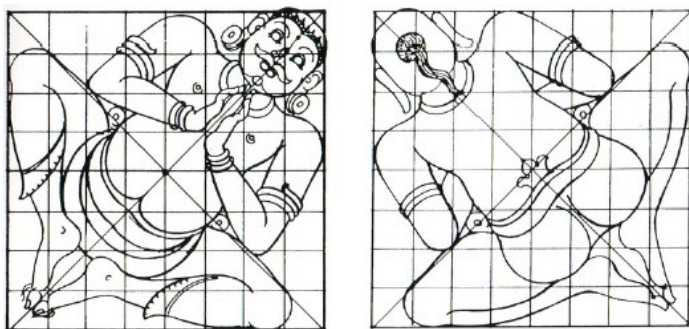


Figure 03. The Vastu Purusha

By the nineteenth century, anthropometry transformed the body into measurable data. Alphonse Bertillon's 'Bertillonage' classified individuals through systematic body measurements, later combined with profile photography, the precursor of the so-called mugshot (Bertillon, 1893). Although he rejected the idea of a fixed 'criminal type,' his system exemplified how measurement could be harnessed for classification and control (Figure 04;05).

This logic did not end with Bertillon, it resurfaced with devastating consequences in the racial hierarchies of the Nazi regime, and continues today in systems like facial recognition, which claim objectivity yet often replicate bias (Figure 06).



Figure 04. Frontispiece from Bertillon's *Identification anthropométrique* (1893), demonstrating the measurements needed for his anthropometric identification system.

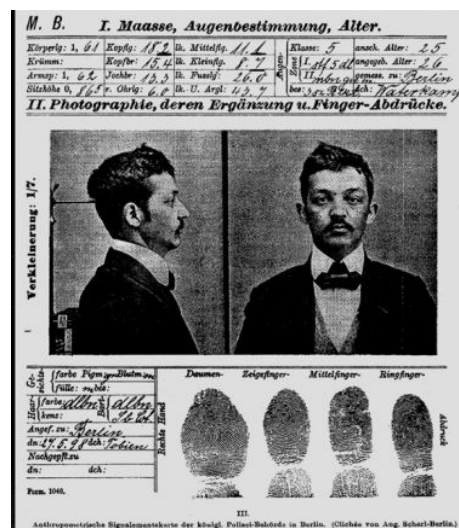


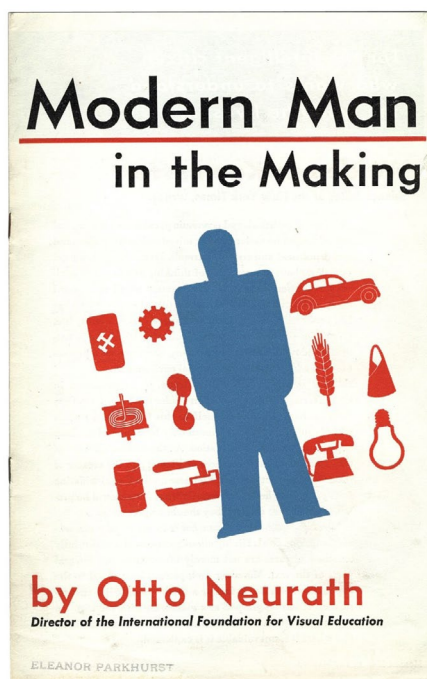
Figure 05. Photographs from Alphonse Bertillon's "Album of Paris Crime Scenes," 1901–1908. (Metropolitan Museum of Art).



Figure 06. The "science" of Nazi Eugenics.

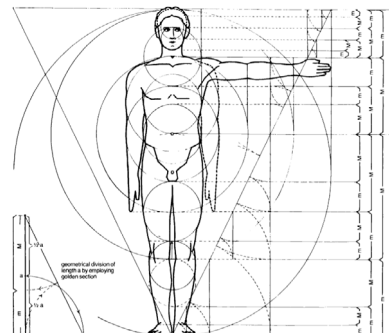
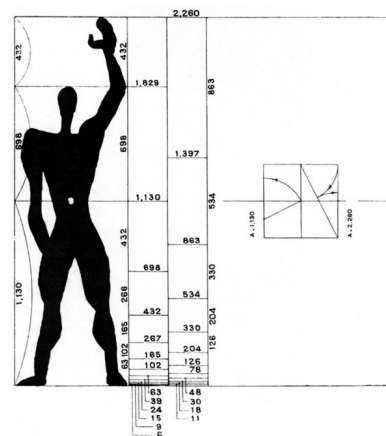
FROM QUANTIFICATION TO NORMALIZATION

The early twentieth century witnessed a surge in efforts to measure, visualize, and standardize human life and activity. In the wake of social and economic upheaval, new democracies sought ways to communicate complex information efficiently, often turning to visual systems. Otto Neurath, a social scientist of the Vienna Circle, developed the *Isotype*, which translated statistical data into simplified pictograms designed to be universally understandable (Neurath, 1925) (Figure 07).

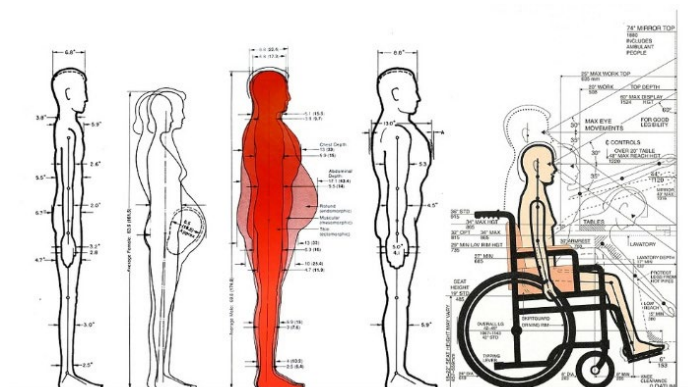
Figure 07. Otto Neurath, *Modern Man in the Making*.

Parallel to this, architects and designers explored standardization through the human figure. Ernst Neufert's *Universal Man* (Figure 08) and Le Corbusier's *Modulor* (Figure 09) abstracted the human body into idealized, proportional silhouettes that informed archi-

tectural and industrial design. These figures were not neutral; they conflated averages, ideals, and even anecdotal references such as the Corbusier's primary inspiration for the *Modulor*: a 'well-built' policeman. (Le Corbusier, 1985; Zöllner, 2014).

Figure 08. Ernst Neufert, *Bautenwurfslehre*, 1936, proportional figure.Figure 09. Le Corbusier, *Modulor*.

Industrial design followed similar logics. Henry Dreyfuss's fictional figures, *Joe and Josephine*, represented the 'universal' consumer, showing how design practices could shape human experience as much as accommodate it (Dreyfuss, 1955; Cristobal et al., 2016) (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Various bodies taken from Henry Dreyfuss's *The Measure of Man and Woman*.

CONCLUSION

Standardization of objects, spaces, and even movement created what Michel Foucault would call 'docile bodies': humans disciplined to fit technical, economic, and social norms (Foucault, 1977/1995). This raises critical questions: is design genuinely centred on humans, or are humans shaped to fit the frameworks of design? And whose body, the idealized, often white, male figure, has been assumed as the standard? These questions set the stage for the following chapters, which examine the nuanced interplay between human experience and design systems.

2. The Body as an Interface

This section is an *entr'acte*, reflecting on how the Body-Image shaped in past decades has influenced the environments we inhabit. We need not turn to abstract theories to recognize this impact; it is evident in the everyday objects and spaces surrounding us. From the chairs that strain our backs to EarPods that never quite fit, our bodies are constantly negotiating with design. These negotiations remain unnoticed until discomfort arises; malfunction makes us aware. While design's impact is not always negative, its failures often reveal more than its success.

THE IMPACT OF THE BODY-IMAGE ON DESIGN

In the early twentieth century, standardization became synonymous with efficiency, hygiene, and modernity. Handbooks such as *Architectural Graphic Standards*, *Time-Saver Standards*, and *Bauentwurfslehre* provided dimensional templates for human activities. They defined a normative 'user' and, in doing so, subordinated design to programs and routines, privileging the typical over the situated.

Henri Lefebvre described the user as one who 'passively experiences' whatever is imposed upon them" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). This default user, an ideological construct, became the centre around which design revolved. Tim Ingold rejected this assumption through his 'dwelling perspective,' emphasising design as an emergent process within lived activities rather than as a projection imposed from outside (Ingold, 2000). Similarly, Heidegger argued that "we build and have build because we dwell" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 148). In contrast to the passive user the dweller actively shapes and is shaped by their environment, a process Bourdieu referred to as 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977).

DESIGNING FOR THE BODY/ DESIGNING THE BODY

The body is not passive; it negotiates with its environment. Technologies, tools, and objects extended bodily capacities, blurring boundaries between self and world. As the philosopher Andy

Clarck notes, humans are "natural-born cyborgs": our cognition and action are constituted with the artifacts we employ (Clark, 2003). Similarly, the historians Colomina and Wigley observed that "the human doesn't simply invent tools, tools invent the human" (Colomina & Wigley, 2016, p. 51). The modern world reshapes bodies through clothing, workplaces, digital platforms, producing an ideological figure of stability. In reality, the body itself becomes an artifact, shaped by the world while shaping it in return.

CONCLUSION

Design and Body-Image are inseparable: the Image of the Body is constructed through Design, while the same image reconstructs the Body, also through Design. In this circularity, the body and its image can be understood as mutually constitutive (Figure 11).

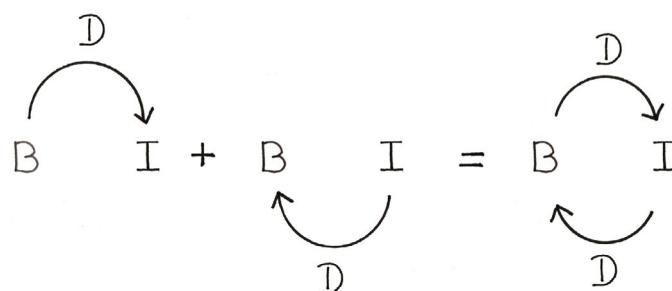


Figure 11. Analytical Diagram explaining the relationship between the body and the image representing it.

3. The Body and the Self

The self, though intangible, is better understood as an emergent, flexible system rather than a fixed entity. Two aspects are central: the sense of being, which involves bodily awareness and perspective on the world, and the narrative self, the story we tell ourselves and others about who we are. Both are shaped and extended by the tools humans employ; for example, glasses or smartphones expand capacities while blurring the boundaries between internal knowledge and external resources (Clark, 2003).

Biologically, the self is porous. It accommodates implants, microbes, and technological extensions, illustrating that its boundaries are neither fixed nor purely organic. Psychologically, boundaries are equally flexible. Neuroscience further shows that the brain dynamically represents the body's boundaries, or *peripersonal space*, which expands and contracts with different interactions (Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2007; Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 2007).

Technology exemplifies the extension of self. The mobile phone, for instance, is not merely a tool but a constant companion that stores memory, provides security and mediates social connec-

tion. Colomina and Wigley (2016) argue that such devices have become integral to the sense of self; influencing cognitive and affective integration with these devices reflects a broader entanglement with artifacts and systems.

From a posthuman perspective, the human self is no longer a central, autonomous entity but as entangled with technologies, networks, and other beings. Feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti provide key insights. Haraway (1985, 2004), in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, uses the figure of the cyborg to challenge traditional boundaries between humans, non-humans, and technology, proposing that these entanglements can help rethink social hierarchies and anthropocentrism. Braidotti (2017) similarly emphasizes the fluidity and relational nature of identity, arguing that the concept of 'Man' as a universal measure dissolves over time, and that humans are inseparable from networks of technologies, animals, and ecosystems in which they exist.

In sum, the self is increasingly enmeshed with technological and biological extensions, with boundaries that are negotiable and dynamic. This perspective naturally leads to an exploration of how humans attempt to quantify, track, and understand themselves through numbers, as tools and data become extensions of perception, memory, and self-awareness.

4. Self-Knowledge through Numbers

Quantification has long shaped how humans understand themselves, first by standardizing the body and later by enabling self-knowledge through data. While early measurements established norms for physical health and behaviour, contemporary quantification extends to cognition, emotion, and activity, often mediated by algorithms that claim to 'know' individuals better than they know themselves (Morozov, 2013). In the twenty-first century, the emphasis has shifted from idealized body proportions to performance, endurance, and optimization, making "self-knowledge through numbers" a contemporary imperative (Clark, 2003).

WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY AS SELF-EXTENSION

Wearable devices exemplified this trend. By continuously collecting data on health, habits, and behaviour, they promise insight and empowerment. Self-tracking via wearables can be considered along three directions:

1. Commodification and Privacy Concerns

Critics argue that the aggregation of personal data enables commercial and governmental exploitation, creating new forms of social pressure and potential discrimination (Morozov, 2013). Privacy, traditionally understood as the right to be left alone (Waren & Brandies, 1890), now extends to data ownership. Sharing data

enables research and personalized feedback but comes at cost of control.

2. Self-Tracking as Empowerment

A second perspective frames self-tracking as a tool for autonomy and self-awareness. Drawing on Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self," individuals can use data to observe, reflect, and modify their own behaviours and habits (Foucault, 1988). This approach, sometimes called "soft resistance," allows individuals to engage with the same systems that might otherwise constrain them, exercising agency through self-observation (Mann, Nolan, & Wellman, 2003).

3. The risk of Outsourcing Self-Knowledge

Finally, there is a risk that reliance on self-tracking can externalize understanding, leading individuals to passively accept data without critical reflection. The value of self-tracking lies however in its feedback loop: data generated from bodily interactions is interpreted reflected upon, and reintegrated into one's behaviour. Balanced feedback loops enable learning and adjustment, while reinforcing loops risk dominance by the system rather than the self (Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2007).

SELF-TRACKING

Self-tracking predates digital technology. Benjamin Franklin charted his adherence to personal virtues as a form of moral self-monitoring (Franklin, 2007). Buckminster Fuller kept detailed records of his daily activities and ideas, and everyday practices, diaries, body measurements, and habit tracking.

Regardless of the method or the tool, self-tracking links behaviours and actions to self-awareness, forming the foundation for contemporary quantified practices.

In conclusion, self-tracking represents a continuum from pre-digital self-observation to algorithmically mediated quantification. Whether through pen and paper or wearable sensors, it transforms passive experiences into actionable feedback, enabling humans to engage more actively with their bodies, behaviours, and environments. This sets the stage for exploring the "Quantified Self" movement as a case study of these practices in the digital age.

5. Quantified Self: Lessons and Applications

Self-tracking is proposed in this essay as a practice of mindfulness and soft resistance, offering an alternative to normative pressures that standardize human behaviour. Next, we will examine the Quantified Self (QS) movement as a case study to demonstrate how self-observation can be operationalized as a design method, moving from simple quantification to meaningful qualification of data (Neff & Nafus, 2016).

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE QUANTIFIED SELF MOVEMENT

Founded in 2007 by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, the QS movement connects thousands worldwide who track aspects of their lives, from sleep patterns to mood, fitness, or creative activity (Quantified Self, 2019). Members share experiments in conferences, meet-ups, and online forums, reflecting on methods, findings, and personal insights. Rather than mere data fetishism, QS practices demonstrated nuanced engagement with personal information: data are interpreted and qualified to support self-understanding, agency, and informed action.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Critics of self-tracking often highlight reductionist tendencies, noting that complex aspects of health and behaviour cannot be fully captured by numbers, and that algorithms may embed normative assumptions (Morozov, 2013). However, actual practices within the QS movement emphasize reflexivity, narrative, and personal experimentation over blind adherence to data. By juxtaposing subjective experience with quantitative measurements, self-trackers engage in 'soft resistance' to normative pressures, iteratively learning from success and failures, and redefining metrics to suit individual needs. This approach positions data as a tool of self-understanding, agency, and mindful reflection rather than mere surveillance or commodification (Quantified Self, 2019).

FROM QUANTIFICATION TO QUALIFICATION

While the Quantified Self movement provides valuable theoretical grounding, the focus of this study is on how self-tracking can be operationalized as a method in design practice, moving from quantification to qualification.

Bruno Latour's "circulating reference" (Figure 12;13) explains how data gain meaning through iterative transformations from raw observation to interpreted knowledge (Latour, 2000). Numbers, like Latour's Forest samples, are not neutral; they acquire signif-

icance through translation and contextualization. In design, this underscores the need to interpret self-tracking data as relational, situated, and co-constructed rather than objective or universal.

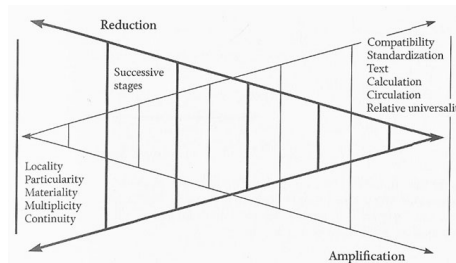


Figure 12. Circulating references. Each step reduces particularity and amplifies universality (Bruno Latour, in *PANDORA'S HOPE*, 1999).

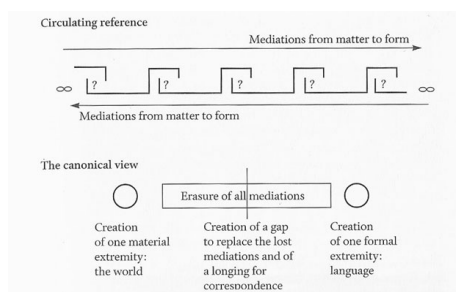


Figure 13. Circulating references. From matter to form (Bruno Latour, in *PANDORA'S HOPE*, 1999).

DESIGN PRACTICES INTEGRATING SELF-TRACKING

Adversarial and Reflective Design: Carl DiSalvo (2012), a professor of Digital Media in the School of Literature, proposes "adversarial design," in which objects and systems provoke reflection rather than solve problems. For example, Usman Haque's *Natural Fuse* is a project that connects household electricity to plants: users confront energy consumption directly, revealing ethical and relational consequences of their behaviour (Haque, 2019). Similarly, the *Erratic Appliances* is a project that introduces unpredictability into household devices, behaving strangely when energy consumption increases, to raise awareness about energy use, emphasizing user engagement through experience rather than efficiency (Ernevi, Palm, & Redström, 2017).

In a similar direction, Laschke and Hassenzahn's *Forget Me Not* lamp embodies a dialogue between user and object: its petal-like reflectors open and close in response to touch, creating a continuous feedback loop that encourages mindfulness of action and energy use (Laschke, 2019). These projects operationalize self-tracking as interactive feedback, allowing people to explore their own patterns and reconsider their habits, without imposing external norms.

Architectural and Spatial Tracking: In architecture, self-tracking informs design through the observation of bodily interactions with space. Pallasmaa (1994) and Halprin (1970s) emphasized the importance of kinaesthetic awareness and embodied perception,

encouraging architects to consider how people experience spaces dynamically.

A notable contemporary project of this approach is the *Experimental Zone* at Humboldt University's Cluster of Excellence *Image Knowledge Gestaltung* (2015–2018), a 350 m² research area designed for the work of forty scientists. To create room for experimentation, the fourth floor of a university building wing was transformed: all interior walls were demolished and a ceiling rail system installed to supply electricity and lighting. This open, flexible space allowed maximum adaptability in arranging furniture, partitions, and instruments, complemented by specially designed, movable workstations (Figure 14). Experimental settings were organized in two- to three-month cycles, totalling eighteen settings over three years, with each iteration designed, built, and observed to understand spatial interactions and support interdisciplinary research. (Marguin, Rabe, & Schmidgall, 2020). Such experiments turn participants into co-designers who reflect on their own behaviours and contribute to iterative spatial adjustments.

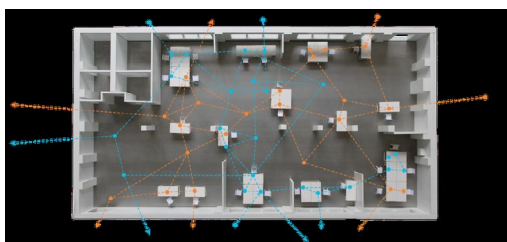


Figure 14. The experimental zone model, *ArchitekturenExperimente*, Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum Für Kulturtechnik.

OPERATIONALIZING SELF-TRACKING AS A DESIGN METHOD

To translate self-tracking into design practice, the following steps can guide designers:

1. Identify Tracking Objectives – Define the aspects of behaviour, bodily experience, or spatial interaction to be explored, based on both designer inquiry and participant interest.
2. Select Tools and Methods – Employ sensors, mapping exercises, diaries, or observational logs to gather data in situ, preserving the nuances of daily experience.
3. Analyse and Reflect – Facilitate discursive consciousness by interpreting data collaboratively, comparing subjective experience with observed patterns.
4. Integrate into Design – Translate insights into iterative design interventions that provoke reflection, challenge norms, or enhance awareness, rather than simply optimizing efficiency.
5. Co-Design with Participants – Treat participants as active agents whose feedback shapes design outcomes, reinforcing ethical and aesthetic

dimensions of design.

This methodology transforms self-tracking into a tool for understanding human-environment entanglements and generating design solutions that are responsive, reflective, and ethically grounded.

Conclusion

This essay has examined how the human body has been constrained by the images and standards embedded in design practice. Throughout this study, we have highlighted the body's fragility, porosity, malleability, and connectivity, revealing its constant negotiation within a thoroughly designed world. These explorations raise critical questions about self-identification and self-design. The body is embedded in relations, to itself, to other bodies, and to the world. It is constantly written and rewritten through its past, present, and future forms.

Being part of a complex network of actors, the body connects with the world through feedback loops, constantly informing and being informed. The following diagram (Figure 15) summarizes the main ideas discussed in this research, visualizing what the future body might look like:

Self-tracking grants Humans ('H') the ability to receive feedback from their entanglements ('X') in the form of data, numbers, charts, or even sensations such as pain. Humans process, analyse, qualify, and reflect on this feedback before feeding it back to X to improve, optimize, or alter it. Crucially, while Humans are informed by X, they can choose whether or not to act, fostering awareness and agency: they may influence their environment or simply observe the effects of their behaviours, such as identifying the cause of discomfort without necessarily changing it.

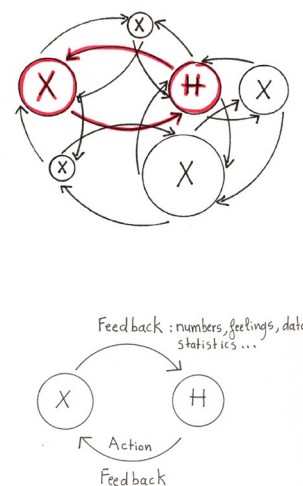


Figure 15: Feedback loops between Humans (H) and their entanglements (X), illustrating how self-tracking fosters agency and reflection.

Acknowledgments

To the stones that I stumbled upon, and to those who helped me carry them

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