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# Autonomic Drawing: a postphenomenological research project

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### Introduction

The series of drawings you will see passing on the screen before you are taken from a current body of research, titled *Autonomic Drawing* (2016). Drawn with coloured biro pens and graphite pencil on A3 graph paper, and produced with the aid of a mechanical metronome, this series comprises the most recent instalment of an on-going research project. For the purposes of research, I consider this series of drawings to comprise a single 'serially developed drawing', for reasons I will explain.

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The aim of producing drawings in this manner is to continue my investigation into the relationship between drawing and temporality. In particular I am keen to question the manner in which drawing might be understood to 'record' the experience of time. To that end this investigation is underpinned by a methodology that is largely phenomenological in scope, coupled with an understanding of drawing that operates according to Philip Rawson's definition: "drawing is produced via a point that moves" (Rawson 1969/1987).

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The point that moves indicates the movement of a drawing implement across a surface, whereupon the point tells the story of its temporal passage in the spatial form of a line. But what else might the drawn line 'tell' about the time it 'took' via the act of being drawn in this manner? Might it, for example, describe the time taken as an activity - a force even - rather

than as a period of duration, passively elapsed? This is the research question that propels *Autonomic Drawing*. As a varied, experimental, intentional and embodied piece of postphenomenological drawing research, *Autonomic Drawing* seeks to explore Henri Bergson's notion that time is a force (Bergson 1913/2001). My interest is in discovering how a process of drawing can *draw out* an understanding of this highly speculative notion, in a manner that is coherent with, yet different from, the form of inscription usually associated with communicating philosophical ideas. I am speaking here of writing – not in the sense that my drawing must supplant writing, but in the sense that drawing can work alongside writing to visually express difficult ideas.

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### **Bergsonian *durée***

The understanding of time as a force begins with Bergson's philosophy of *durée* (duration). *Durée* describes the experience we have of time in a fully subjective sense. As this is a similar understanding to the manner in which time is described by Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology, my investigation is deemed to be phenomenological in epistemological terms. According to Suzanne Guerlac (2006), the English (mis)translation of Bergson's *durée* as 'duration' doesn't quite express what Bergson had in mind. This is because the English term is often used to denote a span of time that elapses between two points, whereas Bergson is speaking of the unceasing flow of time that we experience always and already.

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To the extent that we experience time as a passing 'now' i.e. a series of nows that flow seamlessly *from* the past *into* the future, Bergson thinks of time as a 'vital force' (*élan vital*). The force of time is what pushes us towards the future, rather than back into the past. The thinking behind *élan vital* also underpins Bergson's hypothetical explanation for the evolution of organisms, used to address the vexing question of how organic things self-organise in an increasingly complex manner – what we might refer to in contemporary terms as 'emergence'. Interestingly, Bergson links the notion of *élan vital* to the question of freedom itself, where both are understood in temporal terms i.e. freedom is defined as a question of

time, meaning the gap we inhabit between automatic reaction and voluntary action. And it is this distinction that becomes the key point of interest for me in terms of my drawing research.

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For Bergson, free will *is* the force of lived time, given on the basis that duration acts like a cause, or gain, for conscious beings. To the extent that time is a gain, and acts as a cause, it becomes a force. This is another way of saying that we cannot travel backwards in time (Bergson 1913/2001, 153). The sum of memory (the 'past') slipping into consciousness (the 'present') provides us with the means for deciding *how* to act, and offers the potential to escape the instantaneity of an automatic reaction. As Guerlac succinctly describes it, "this escape, for Bergson, is the essence of what free will means: the possibility of voluntary action as opposed to automatic reaction" (Guerlac 2006, 81).

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The concept of time as a force is the radical notion that serves as the point of departure for all Bergson's major works. What *Autonomic Drawing* sets out to do is test this speculative notion in empirical i.e. observable terms. This is enabled by exploring the relationship between voluntary action and automatic reaction within the process of serially developed drawing. To focus upon this gap, I deploy a postphenomenological methodology that directs the drawing process in its entirety, working in tandem with Bergson's theory of time.

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#### **Drawing practice**

*Autonomic Drawing* is a serially developed drawing, produced with the aid of a mechanical metronome, A3 graph paper, coloured biro pens and a mechanical pencil. The purpose of the metronome is to 'keep time' for a set duration, while the drawer draws repetitive lines 'in time' to each tick. The aim is to try and 'capture' the force of time within the simple stroke of a pen, somehow.

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On each of these drawings you can see presented a framework of six horizontal lines drawn in pencil that come off from a vertical column. Each horizontal line is 20 squares of graph paper wide. Each individual square represents 1 second of duration. This means each horizontal line represents 20 seconds. Along each horizontal line you can see a series of coloured lines – these are the lines I have drawn in time to the beat of the metronome. As there are six horizontal lines in each drawing, and as each line represents 20 seconds, each drawing records two minutes of actual time spent drawing. After a period of experimentation, I selected three tempos to work with – 60, 120 and 180 bpm. Bpm is ‘beats per minute’, meaning the tempo which the metronome is ticking at while I draw. The 60bpm variety are the longer lines drawn in green biro. The 120bpm variety are the middle length lines drawn in blue biro. And the 180bpm variety are the very short lines drawn in red biro.

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In order to begin a drawing, I set the metronome ticking at a desired tempo. I then commence drawing a series of lines ‘in time’ to the metronome beat, working along the length of each horizontal line in turn. For the 60bpm variety this means drawing one green line per square, drawing at a rate of one line per second. For the 120bpm variety it means two slightly shorter blue lines per square, drawn at a rate of two lines per second. And for the 180bpm variety it means three very short red lines, drawing at a rate of 3 lines per second – a pace that is very hard to sustain! Each line is drawn in a single fluid gesture of the hand. Each horizontal line is completed in one go, whereupon I stop drawing and reset the metronome ready for the next horizontal line. The shrinking length of line seen across the three colours, from green to blue to red, corresponds to the reduced amount of time I had to draw them, according to the increased tempo.

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To describe the act of drawing, I’ll add the following. During the 60bpm variety I had a whole second in which to draw a single line. This means each green line has a spatial length that corresponds to this particular temporal span. I begin drawing each line on the first beat of the metronome, and ended it in time to begin drawing the next line on the next beat. For 120bpm variety I had to draw two lines inside a single second, so each blue line is correspondingly

shorter than the green ones – at 120bpm I needed to draw two lines within a single second, rather than just one. For 180bpm variety I had to try and keep up with the metronome by drawing *three* red lines within the duration of a single second. This is much harder to do, and correspondingly, the red lines are the shortest of all.

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As you can see, I varied the formation of coloured tempos within the format of each drawing, mixing the 60, 120 and 180bpm variety according to an overall schema. This schema repeated the tempos until a certain symmetry was arrived at, both along and across the series as a whole. However, despite the change in tempos, each individual drawing in this series is a two-minute drawing – both the number and extension of all the coloured lines corresponds to precisely two minutes of drawing time.

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#### Variational method

Why did I vary the tempo? Because within my methodology is a method called variational practice, or the practice of variational theory. This is a method initially developed by Husserl for ‘doing’ phenomenology essentially, and has been recently redeveloped by philosopher Don Ihde within his ‘postphenomenological’ approach.

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As Ihde describes it, “at the core of phenomenology in practice lay *variational theory* – in looking at any phenomenon, one must place it within its possibilities, its variations” (Ihde 2008, 6, original italics). Husserl described this process as *eidetic* or “imaginative free variation” (Moran and Cohen 2012, 159), deployed to seek the invariant ‘essence’ from with the variety of angles any single phenomenon presents. Ihde’s approach also seeks the possible, but refrains from explicitly seeking essences. Instead, Ihde focuses on describing how structures often appear to be *multistable*. For the purposes of research, I am treating Bergson’s force of time as the phenomenon under investigation.

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Multistability is Ihde's addition to phenomenology, hence 'postphenomenology'. Recognising that playful engagement with multiple possibilities can function as an end in itself, Ihde's approach has a lot in common with the arts. As a piece of practice-led drawing research seeking to investigate Bergsonian time, *Autonomic Drawing* follows Ihde's multistable approach. Deciding to opt for this over seeking invariant or 'essential' lines in a Husserlian sense means I realise that the three different tempos of 60, 120 and 180bpm can be arranged in multiple ways. To the extent that I physically realised some of these possibilities, I produced a serially developed drawing in the manner of Sol Lewitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974).

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The various iterations of *Autonomic Drawing* seen here constitute a completed stage of this serially developed drawing. By 'completed' I mean that within the overall series there is a finite combination of tempos arranged on each sheet and across the series as a whole, before things begin to repeat themselves. Serial drawing understood in this manner is described by Nicolas de Warren as "the singular plurality rather than the plurality of the singular" (de Warren 2004, 11). On this basis *Autonomic Drawing* is understood to occupy a larger structure than any of the local structures might suggest. Reaching this outcome through the use of Ihde's variational practice means that *Autonomic Drawing* is now a piece of postphenomenological research into time through drawing.

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### **The force of time.**

In varying the tempo of the metronome I was most curious to see the effect the increased tempo would have on my ability to 'keep time' whilst drawing lines. By drawing each line deliberately i.e. intentionally, I recognized that an increase in tempo would likely affect the ratio of voluntary action to automatic reaction. This proved to be correct. At the higher tempo the time between ticks became 'compressed', meaning the "zone of indeterminacy" (Guerlac 2006, 118) also contracted – time for conscious reflection shrank, and was replaced by a bodily rhythm that appeared better at 'keeping' time. If we think of rhythm as describing the

body's expectation of a return (Abraham 1995), then it's clear why the notion of an embodied rhythm became vital to keeping time as the tempo increased.

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Indeed, the rhythm of drawing to a rapidly ticking metronome is nothing if not embodied. Bergson's theoretical 'force of time' is now felt as the physical pressure *to* draw, resulting in the act of drawing becoming much more difficult to maintain. Indeed, the act of drawing short red lines at 180bpm did not suggest time as a purely spatial quantity that could be retraced, but instead spoke of a forceful quality to time that itself became unsustainable. As Bergson says, "a sensation, by the mere fact of being prolonged, is altered to the point of becoming unbearable" (Bergson 1913/2001, 153). Described in terms of Bergsonian free will, the freedom I had to 'end' this automatic reaction *to* time – for example by stopping drawing lines - became the freedom to regain voluntary action *over* time, once again.

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#### Conclusion

Recalling that, for Bergson, free will *is* the force of lived time (given on the basis that duration acts like a cause, or gain, for conscious beings) I return to my earlier question and ask: what can these drawn lines tell me about the lack of freedom I experienced when drawing, and in what way might this plausibly indicate time understood as a force? Well, drawing 3 red lines a second meant there was no 'time' for reflection between each line – the body that draws is simply reacting-*to* the pace of the rhythm in an autonomic fashion. As the tempo decreases, the duration between each tick opens up slightly, and we can see the empirical evidence for this in the longer form of the blue and green lines. This increase in freedom offers the drawer the potential to escape the instantaneity of an automatic reaction, which again, the form of these lines demonstrate, to a degree. As Guerlac says, "this escape, for Bergson, is the essence of what free will means: the possibility of voluntary action as opposed to automatic reaction" (Guerlac 2006, 81).

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From what I have described, it would seem that this multistable serial drawing expresses an alternative interpretation of Bergson's *élan vital* than the act of writing alone could manage. Yet when shown in tandem with writing, this serially developed drawing speaks of the force of time in visual terms, rendering Bergson's notion of free will visible as a diagrammatic understanding. As a piece of postphenomenological drawing research, I would argue that this presents a way to understand how drawing functions as the diagram of experience, understood in both physical and conceptual terms. In other words, we draw out an understanding of time, by drawing out a series of colourful lines.

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