

The Force of Time: Diagramming Bergson's *élan vital*

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Introduction

The series of drawings you will see slowly passing on the screen before you are taken from a current body of work, titled *Autonomic Drawing* (2016). Produced with coloured biro and pencil on A3 graph paper, and undertaken with the aid of a mechanical metronome, they comprise the current instalment of my on-going metronomic drawing series, described by me as a serial drawing. The aim of producing serially developed drawings in this manner is to continue my investigation into the relationship between drawing and temporality, specifically questioning the manner in which drawing might be understood to 'record' time. This investigation is underpinned by a methodology that is phenomenological in scope, coupled with an understanding of drawing as meaning: that which is produced via a 'point that moves' (Rawson 1969/1987). The point that moves indicates the intentional movement of a drawing implement across a surface, whereupon the passage of this point tells its duration in the (spatial) form of a line. But what else might the drawn line 'tell' about the time it 'took' in this manner? Might it, for example, describe time as an activity - a force even - rather than a passive form of duration? This is the research question that propels my current project, and which I look to expand upon here. *Autonomic Drawing* approaches the task just described in quite specific terms. As a varied, experimental, intentional and embodied piece of postphenomenological drawing research, it seeks to explore the 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 rather speculative and purely philosophical notion, in a manner that is physically coherent, yet radically different from other forms of expression, such as writing.

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 subjective sense. As this is a similar understanding in many ways to the manner in which time was described by Edmund Husserl, the investigation of Bergson's theory through drawing is deemed to be phenomenological for the purposes of research. According to Suzanne Guerlac (2006) the English (mis)translation of Bergson's *durée* as 'duration' doesn't quite express what Bergson had in mind, because duration is often used to denote a span of time that has elapsed between two points, whereas Bergson is speaking of the unceasing flow of time that we experience always and already. To the extent that we experience time as a moving 'now' - i.e. a series of nows that seem to flow seamlessly *from* the past *into* the future - Bergson thinks of time as a 'vital force' (*élan vital*) on the basis we cannot travel backwards through it. 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 from a philosophical point of view, Bergson links the notion of *élan vital* to the question of freedom itself, where both are understood in temporal terms i.e. as a question of time.

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

Suzanne 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). The concept of time as a form of energy 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, by exploring the relationship between voluntary action and automatic reaction within the process of a serially developed drawing. To facilitate this process, I deploy a postphenomenological methodology that directs the drawing process. I will return to describe both this and Bergson’s ideas in a little more detail shortly, once I have outlined the drawing practice I developed in response.

Drawing practice:

To clarify, *Autonomic Drawing* is a serial drawing, developed with the aid of a mechanical metronome, A3 graph paper, and a 0.5mm 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. On each of these drawings you can see presented a framework of six horizontal lines that come off a vertical column. Each square of graph paper along each horizontal line represents 1 second of duration. Each horizontal line is 20 squares in length. 20 x 1 second is 20 seconds, so each horizontal line records a 20 second duration, meaning that it takes 20 seconds to draw along. As there are six horizontal lines in each of these drawings, each records two minutes of actual time spent drawing (6 x 20 seconds is two minutes). The downward lines you can see coming off each horizontal line is drawn freehand by me, ‘in time’ to the ticking of the metronome. After a period of experimentation, I selected three tempos to work with – 60, 120 and 180 bpm (beats per minute). In order to begin drawing I set the metronome ticking. I then commenced drawing a series of short vertical lines ‘in time’ to the ticks, working serially along each of the six horizontal lines. For the 60bpm variety this meant drawing one longish vertical line per box (1 line per 1 second). For the 120bpm it meant two slightly shorter lines (2 lines per second), and for the 180bpm it meant three very short lines (3 lines per second). Each line was drawn in a single motion of the hand.

The differing vertical length of drawn line across each of the three configurations corresponds to the amount of time I had to draw inside a second. During the 60bpm variety I had a whole second to draw a single line, which means that the line has a spatial length which corresponds to this duration. For 120bpm I had to draw two lines inside a single second, so each line is correspondingly shorter. For 180bpm I had to try and keep up with the metronome by drawing *three* lines inside each second i.e. inside each box. This is much harder to do, and correspondingly, the drawn lines drawn are the shortest of all – just three short lines inside each box. As you can see from the slides, I varied the formation of these tempos within each drawing, mixing the 60, 120 and 180 bpm variety. However, each and every drawing in this series is a two-minute drawing – both the number and extension (length) of all the lines corresponds to precisely two minutes of drawing time.

Variational theory:

Why did I vary the tempo? Because within my overall methodology is something called variational theory, or in my case variational practice. This is a phenomenological tool initially developed by Edmund Husserl for doing phenomenology, and has been recently redeveloped by the American philosopher Don Ihde within what he calls his ‘postphenomenological’ approach. As Ihde says, “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’. Ihde’s approach uses a similar method of seeking the possible, but refrains from explicitly seeking essences in the Husserlian manner. Instead, Ihde focuses on describing how structures often appear to be *multistable*. Multistability is the postphenomenological approach to

variational practice. Recognising that playful engagement with multiple possibilities can function as an end in itself, postphenomenology has a lot in common with the arts. As a piece of practice-led drawing research which sets out to investigate Bergsonian time, *Autonomic Drawing* follows Ihde's approach. Remaining in a multistable mode, I realised that the three different tempos of 60, 120 and 180bpm could be arranged in a variety of possible ways on the six horizontal lines. 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). This means that within the overall series, there is a finite number of combinations of the three different tempos arranged on each single sheet. 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). Reaching this outcome through the use of Ihde's variational practice means that *Autonomic Drawing* is perceived to occupy a larger structure than any of the local structures which any single A3 sheet suggests.

The force of time.

In varying the tempo of the metronome, I was 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 the increased 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, then it's clear why the notion of an embodied rhythm became important to keeping time through drawing as the tempo increased. Indeed, the rhythm of drawing to a rapidly ticking metronome is nothing if not embodied. The 'force of time' is felt as the pressure *to* draw, resulting in the act of drawing becoming *more difficult to maintain*. Described in Bergsonian terms, drawing lines at 180bpm did not suggest time as a spatial quantity that could be retraced, but instead spoke of a durational quality that became unsustainable – "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 (i.e. stopping drawing lines at 180bpm) became the freedom to regain voluntary action *over* time, once again;

Whilst past time is neither a gain nor a loss for a system assumed to be conservative, it may be a gain for the living being, and it is indisputably one for the conscious being.

With this in mind, what I am seeking from these drawings is to examine them to see what the lines can tell me about the notion of time understood as a force – the notion that duration, i.e. the sum of consciousness we experience at any given moment, is itself the force of lived time. 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 – the question then becomes what these drawn lines can tell me about this lack of freedom? For example, when drawing lines at 180bpm there is little to no 'time' for conscious reflection between each line – the body is simply reacting to the pace of the rhythm. As the tempo decreases the duration between each tick opens up slightly, and offers the potential to escape the instantaneity of an automatic reaction. Again, the quote by Suzanne Guerlac mentioned earlier, "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). Returning to the notion of variational practice outlined previously, I ask – is it possible to seek an invariant form from within the lines I have drawn at 180bpm? By this I mean, within the minute variation which is present across all of these lines drawn at 180bpm, is there a particular form which might invariantly describe my bodily response to the pressure of time, given that this pressure is felt as the pressure to draw? This is a question from Husserlian phenomenology raised at the end of this current body of work, and is not one that I have so far found an answer to.

Conclusion

However, this search for the invariant is not the only way to interpret these drawings as 'data' in phenomenological terms. Moving beyond the philosophical interest in Bergsonian time, Ihde's approach uses a similar method of seeking the possible, but refrains from explicitly seeking essences in the Husserlian manner. Instead, Ihde focuses on describing how phenomenological structures often appear to be *multistable*. Multistability is the anti-essential postphenomenological approach to variational practice. Recognising that playful engagement with multiple possibilities can function as an end in itself, postphenomenology has a lot in common with the arts. Ihde also recognises this, seeing the arts as an exercise in variations in which their playfulness is "deeply related to phenomenological playfulness" (Ihde 2012, 108).

Although it is very much a work in progress, this project follows the latter, postphenomenological approach. This means I did not seek essences, although I could. Remaining in a multistable mode, I realised that the three different tempos of 60, 120 and 180bpm could be arranged in a variety of possible ways on the six horizontal lines. To the extent that I physically realised some of these possibilities, I produced a serially developed drawing (rather than a series of drawings) in the manner of Sol Lewitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974). Serial drawing understood in this bifurcated manner is described by Nicolas de Warren as "the singular plurality rather than the plurality of the singular" (de Warren 2004, 11). Reaching this outcome through the use of Ihde's variational practice means that *Autonomic Drawing* is perceived to occupy a larger structure than the local structure which any single A3 sheet suggests. Ihde understands the importance of this search for conducting phenomenology proper. And yet, although he recognises the connection between art and phenomenology, for Ihde art *isn't* philosophy, and so needn't concern itself with similar goals;

Only through variation, Husserl claims, does the invariant show itself; only through phenomenology is a fundamental ontology possible, claims Heidegger. Neither of these claims concern the arts; but they are essential to phenomenology. But this is merely to say that art is not philosophy, and philosophy is not art, even though an artful philosophy is to be preferred to any other kind (Ihde 2012, 112).

Speaking as an artist who has recently completed his practice-led PhD, I find I disagree with this notion. It was precisely because of Husserl's method of variational practice that my phenomenologically framed drawing research was able to surmount certain difficulties which, at the time, appeared unsurmountable. Seeking that which was invariantly understood from within a series of 'failing' drawings allowed me to refocus and carefully parse my practice, correctly identifying those elements that were working, and disregarding those that were not. Whether this speaks to a clear division between practice-led research and art, or whether it suggests that Ihde's conception of art needs updating, I could not say. But as both options for applying variational practice exist, then the interested practitioner need not choose. Instead, they can elect to use them both - remaining open to being playful *and* serious, multistable *and* invariant, speculative *and* concrete. In other words: attempting to describe the force of time by drawing a series of lines.

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