# Autonomic Drawing: Postphenomenology and Pedagogy

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## Introduction

This paper presents an outline of my current drawing research, described in practical, theoretical and pedagogic terms. My aim is to describe how Don Ihde's (2012) postphenomenological approach allows me to undertake interdisciplinary practice-led research. In articulating this position, including how I combine it with Bergsonian philosophy and the practice of drawing, I will use a current project, *Autonomic Drawing*, as evidence in support.

The impetus for this project is the same as all my other current research projects – seeking various drawn ways to express the passing of time. *Autonomic Drawing* approaches this task in quite specific terms. As a varied, experimental, intentional and embodied piece of drawing research, it seeks to explore the Bergsonian notion that time is a force (Bergson 1913/2001). My interest is in discovering how a process of drawing can potentially 'draw out' an understanding of this highly speculative notion, in a manner that is both coherent yet radically different from other forms of expression, such as writing. 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 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 drawing.

## Postphenomenology

Postphenomenology is a term put forward by the philosopher Don Ihde (2008, 2012). Described as a non-foundational, anti-essentialist and anti-Cartesian approach, it combines the more interdisciplinary elements of continental phenomenology with an empirical turn favoured by both pragmatism and analytic philosophy. Although somewhat less familiar than its predecessor terms 'transcendental', 'hermeneutic' and 'existential', postphenomenology offers a vigorous reinterpretation of Husserl's original motivation – to "return to the things themselves". For Husserl this meant *doing* phenomenology, treating it as a playful yet practical discipline for describing the richness of experience (Ihde 2008, 8).

There are four elements to understanding the practice of postphenomenology. The first is variational practice (or the practice of variational theory). 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' (*eidos*). As postphenomenology adopts an anti-essentialist approach, essences are not searched for. Instead, one uses this approach to describe 'multistable' structures, be they visual, aural, kinaesthetic or

otherwise. Second is the experiential element. In tune with developments in the social sciences, postphenomenology is rendered emphatically intersubjective in regards to corroborating one's epistemological claims. As Ihde says;

> Postphenomenology remains experiential but not "subjectivistic". Clearly one begins with first person experience, but one does not end with it. Rather, *intersubjective checking and critique* are also part of the descriptive process. (Ihde 2008, 6, original italics)

Third is the intentional element. Since its inception, phenomenology has developed an inter-relational ontology in the form of *intentionality.* Offering a framework for describing the relation between subject and object (or subject and subject), it comes in different guises. Husserl described consciousness as simply meaning consciousness-*of,* whereas Heidegger's "being-in-the world", and Merleau-Ponty's *être-au-monde* provide more existential versions. Postphenomenology continues the inter-relational understanding by seeing intentionality as compatible with, "the experientialized interaction between a living organism and its environment… in this case with a human experiential interaction with a *lifeworld.* "(Ihde 2008, 7, original italics). Fourthly there is embodiment. As a non-foundational approach, postphenomenology rejects Husserl's disembodied 'transcendental' attitude, the view from nowhere. Continuing the hermeneutic and pragmatic traditions, Ihde emphasizes both perspectivalism and situated forms of knowing, combining them with a sensitivity to materiality (Ihde 2008, 7). I would argue this last element is of especial interests to artists and practitioners, for it is via the embodied handling of material that praxis can cohere *sensibly* to the concepts at stake.

**Autonomic Drawing**

The question now raised is – how do these four elements enable the drawer to explore Bergson's notion that time is a force? In an effort to make this clear, *Autonomic Drawing* will be described in relation to each. Given the importance of variational practice as a research tool I will conclude with its description, not least because there are two roles it can play – one largely pedagogic, while the other is perhaps more artistic. The choice depends on the way one interprets the notion of practice as research. *Autonomic Drawing* is a serially developed drawing that uses 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. After a lengthy 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 I had drawn in preparatory fashion on each A3 sheet. For the 60bpm variety this meant drawing one short 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 an upwards motion, and each of the six horizontal lines represents 20 seconds of drawn duration (1 box = 1 second).

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 as 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. (Bergson 1913/2001, 153).

**Variational practice**

What role does variational practice play in all of this? Variational practice is the act of seeking the possible, beyond the contingency of the given. For the purposes of argument there are two ways in which this process can be understood, the first developed by Husserl, the second by Ihde. As far as elucidating Bergson's theory of time in relation to drawing, each offers a means to interpret the drawings differently. In pedagogical terms however, variational practice can also help *further* the research at critical points.

Husserl used variational theory to seek the 'essence' of any given phenomenon – meaning that which is understood to be invariant across all possible variation. Otherwise described as "imaginative free variation" (Moran and Cohen 2012, 160), the purpose was to free oneself from the factual contingency of the object as given, and instead use the imagination to vary the possibilities until the invariant essence emerged. The invariant features are those which cannot be varied in the imagination, meaning "the whole point of free variation is to open up new aspects of the experience and especially those invariant aspects – aspects which belong to the essence of the experience" (Moran and Cohen 2012, 161). 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, *Autonomic Drawing* 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.

**Conclusion**

However, this postphenomenological route through variational practice leaves out the search for the invariant as recommended by Husserl. 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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