

# The Specious Line: Drawing as a method for re-presenting the specious present.

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## Introduction

This paper functions as a report on practice, describing the layout and the outcome of a recent first-person investigation through drawing. In simple terms this investigation was set up with the aim of exploring the potential for the drawn line to re-present my experience of the present moment in time as it 'passed'. As an artist who draws my working hypothesis is that drawing re-presents time in a very different way from other forms of expression, such as writing. My research seeks to test this hypothesis across a range of practical experiments that employ drawing as a tool for describing my experience of time (Hill, 1966).

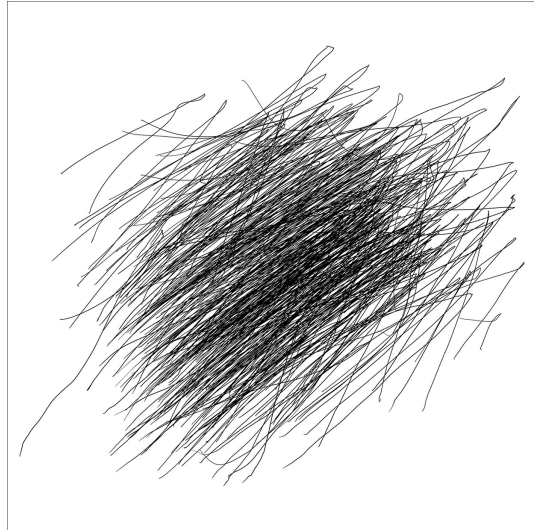
However, from this practical concern with drawing re-presenting the experience of time (temporality) arises the possible means to question a topic that has long been pertinent to the practice and theory of drawing - the historical notion of the autographic or authorial nature of the line. My angle of approach towards this question makes use of the phenomenological understanding of temporality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Husserl, 1931/2012) to investigate what Bernice Rose (1976, p. 14) calls the, 'graphological confession' i.e. the idea that the act of drawing generates a 'true' or *essential* expression of subjective presence which the drawer leaves behind. Reflecting on the topics of time and authorship via the practice of drawing understood as a form of self-expression constitutes the overall aim of my investigations considered as drawing research.



The concept used to frame this paper in practical and theoretical terms is connected to the phrase the 'specious present'. This is a term first used by William James (1890/1950) to describe the peculiar experience the subject has of the present moment in time. The *now* i.e. the moment in time we call 'the present', is a strange and misleading (specious) phenomenon, on the basis that when we reflect upon it we realise that we experience that which is 'present' as simultaneously passing. In other words, rather than finding ourselves faced with a

present that is 'present' we find we are faced with the paradox of a present that is already *past* (Dainton, 2000; Varela F. J., 1999). However, rather than focusing solely upon the philosophical intricacies this phenomenological understanding of time entails, the aim of this investigation is to use philosophy as a means to reflect upon drawing as a discipline – to, 'perform philosophy in a non-philosophical way' as the artist Clodagh Emoe (2014) recently described it.

Although seemingly counterintuitive, I find this proposition useful for my particular practice, for it suggests that instead of turning art into an object for philosophy, the artist, 'uses philosophy to reveal the specific form of thought that is immanent to art' (Emoe, 2014, p. 15). The overall form of thought I am interested in revealing is how the act of drawing entails the production of marks or gestures that are themselves considered 'revelatory' in some way (Rosand, 2002). Beginning with the question of how drawing reveals the flow of time, it is my contention that the act of drawing, understood as produced via a point that moves (Rawson, 1969/1987) serves to demonstrate how time might be understood to 'pass', which in turn makes the question of authorship visible in ways that writing does not.



### Research approach

In order to successfully design an investigative approach that can both sensibly tackle this topic and be clearly communicated to the viewer (or reader), the drawings, as the focus of the investigation, must themselves operate according to an established code of communication. According to Roberts and Riley (2012, p.68) such a code must entail three main functions. These are

To represent some aspect of our experiences of the world; to both express our attitude and mood regarding our experience, and to position the receiver in terms of mood and attitude towards that which is being represented; and to structure these two into a coherent, perceptible form. These functions may be termed the *representational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *compositional*.

With this structure as a guide to direct my own enquiry, my investigation proceeded as follows. The overall aim of my investigation is 'representational', meaning my aim is to *re-present* my experience of time framed by the passing of the present via the act of drawing. In order for this aim to be coherent, the main body of my argument is 'interpersonal', in that it sets out the essential points that help clarify the theoretical argument through which this notion can be understood - to position the reader/viewers mood and attitude in advance. Finally, in 'compositional terms', the theorization is combined in practice, where the drawings presented here are understood as a direct response to the argument as posed.

In interpersonal terms, the description of drawing and the specious present which follow are presented according to certain decisions I have made to provide a basic, elementary or essential way to comprehend them as factors within the investigation. As a way to define my terms, these statements can be thought of as clarifying the *essence* to the problem at hand. What do I mean by 'essence' in this manner? As a term with a long history of use within philosophy, essence can be obscurely understood. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002, p.vii), phenomenology can be defined as the, 'search for essences'. As mine is a phenomenological investigation given the focus on the subjective experience of time, this approach serves me well. On that note, Martin Heidegger gives this useful description of essence in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1971, p.50)

What do we have in mind when speaking of essence? Usually it is thought to be those features held in common by everything that is true. The essence is discovered in the generic and universal concept, which represents the one feature that holds indifferently for many things.

Within my research I employ the term essence closer to the Husserlian (1931/2012) understanding. Essence on Edmund Husserl's account refers specifically to the



Socratic term *eidos*, meaning what belongs to something invariantly - its 'whatness' or 'what it is' (Moran, Cohen 2012, p.111). The eidetic understanding can be held in opposition to the factual instances thereof e.g. *this* or *that* particular drawing. However, rather than treat the following statements as defining the essence of drawing or the specious present *per se*, they are merely put in place to guide my investigation, and provide me the means to develop my drawings in response to my theoretical aims.

## **Drawing**

According to Bernice Rose (1976, p. 14), drawing can be described as a, 'structure in which lines and other kinds of marks are arranged in related groupings according to a master plan to which the whole arrangement is subordinate.' This describes drawing understood as an object. But what about drawing described as an act? Following Philip Rawson (1969/1987) we can say that a drawing (noun) is produced through a point that moves. Rawson calls this this 'kinetic basis of drawing' (1969/1987, p. 15) in recognition of the fact that drawing is fundamentally about the act *of* drawing i.e. the movement from one place to another that leaves a trace of its passage in the form of a line. This line can constitute all, or part of, the drawing that results.

This regard for the moving point as the essence of 'what drawing is' is underpinned by Klee's (1925/1953) famous dictum in his *Pedagogical Sketchbook*

that the, 'active line on a walk' has as its mobility agent 'a point, shifting its position forward' (Klee, Moholy-Nagy 1953, p.16). For Klee, the form of the line is what it is because it was formed by a shift of position of the point. Rawson adds to this basic understanding another conception, which is of on-going interest to my practical investigations. It concerns the phenomenological observation of the manner in which the movement that underpinned the line is then re-experienced by a viewer, once the line is drawn. For although once drawn upon a surface a line is static and does not change or move, 'there always lies at the bottom of every drawing an implied pattern of those movements through which it was created' (Rawson 1987, p.15).

In other words, once the point has moved and left a trace of its passage in the form of a line, the act of following it with our eyes can lead us to say that it has essentially re-presented this journey within itself, as a line. In being understood as drawn, the line re-presents not only the movement of the point, but by inference the *presence* of the draftsman who moved it. The living, breathing body of the draftsman is implicated within the line. On this topic David Rosand (2002, p. 15) examines Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'the painter takes his body with him' and says, 'the observation is even truer of drawing, where the movements of the body, actual and imagined, are more directly recorded by the tracing hand'. Rosand understands the drawn line to be self-reflexively a record on this account. The drawn line forms a 'direct record' of the movement that created it - the gesture of drawing is in essence, a projection of the body.



Via this indexical understanding of the line as a re-presentation of the trajectory of the point, the line then tells its own history of being made, which, 'quite naturally implicates the draftsman within itself' (Rosand 2002, p.13). However, this notion of the autographic or authorial line implicating 'a draftsman' sits slightly to one side of positively attributing the *unique* author via some form of graphic assessment. This was a central concern of drawing connoisseurship, the art historical discipline that sought to attribute individual authorship based upon a particular artists graphic style. Despite the line serving to indicate the presence of a draftsman through the fact that it was drawn, connoisseurship foundered for the most part when its supposedly objective analysis of determining 'who' that presence might refer to was taken apart for inspection. As Rosand (2002, p. 3) remarks, 'however it may hold out the prospect of objectifiable conclusion, its inevitable appeal is to subjectivity of response.'

However, although I find the question of the autographic line intriguing, connected as it is to drawing understood as a form of self-expression, as I undertake my investigations from a first-person perspective the question of authorship is attributed *simpliciter*. With that in mind, I am required to approach the question via an indirect approach. As referred to in my introduction, I elect to do this via the topic of time, or temporality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Husserl, 1931/2012), which method of approach this investigation forms a part. To help address this topic, and before I

outline my understanding of time within the context of the specious present, the question of what the drawn line describes 'in itself' is raised. Edward Hill (1966, p.8) gives this description for how to understand what drawing expresses, free from all representational or mimetic responsibilities

Drawing diagrams experience. It is a transposition and a solidification of the minds perceptions. From this we see drawing not simply as gesture, but as mediator, as a visual thought process which enables the artist to transform into an ordered consequence what he perceives in common (or visionary) experience. For the artist, drawing is actually a form of experiencing, a way of measuring the proportions of existence at a particular moment.

This notion of drawing functioning as a diagram of experience emerges as a useful understanding within this investigation, and indeed within my wider research. The fact that Hill feels that drawing diagrams 'experience', understood in a non-specific i.e. essential sense, opens up the possibility for questioning what sort of experience that might refer to. The clue is in fact given in Hill's own quote - drawing *itself* is a form of experiencing. When added to the concept that I am seeking to re-present (the specious present) I find a further link. The specious present concerns the peculiar way in which we subjectively experience the moment of *now* – the present moment in time. Considered as the essence or being of time (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p. 409), the *now* can be thought of as the form that characterises the 'particular moment' to which Hill refers.



### **The Specious Present**

The term *specious* means superficially plausible, but once inspected, actually misleading in some way. Although time can be described as either cyclical or linear in respect of its rhythms, time as we experience it 'now' is very different from the movement of the hands of a clock. We look ahead into the future, and back into the past, but in doing so we seem to dwell within the present to a degree that, ontologically speaking, suggests neither

the past nor the future seems to exist for us in quite the same way. Yet although various kinds of philosophical reflection towards this understanding have been undertaken since Aristotle, the question of how we establish ourselves 'in' a present that is already *passing* is perceived as an on-going problem within the philosophy of time (Dainton, 2000; Sider, 2001). To indicate this difficulty I can point towards a classic historical account of time given by St Augustine (trans Chadwick 1992, p.230)

What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an enquirer I do not know. But I confidently affirm myself to know that if

nothing passes away, there is no past time, and if nothing arrives, there is no future time, and if nothing existed there would be no present time.

Quite so, and yet - where does such a description leave us? None the wiser perhaps. Although we have no problem living and being 'within' the present in the everyday, the moment that we try to pull it apart in order to describe the subjective experience of time through philosophical inspection, we come unstuck. It is something of an *aporia* in this regard - a philosophical puzzle. Phenomenally speaking, we experience the present moment in time as a paradoxically unified period of duration *within* the ever-changing flow of conscious life. For example, the metaphor of the 'stream of consciousness' refers to events or thoughts that seem to follow each other - not it should be noted, in space, but in time (Crane, 2013). Indeed, if events did not follow each other in this manner, where our past events occur prior to our future ones, life would not make much sense.

Yet although we colloquially use the term 'stream' to refer to the subjective experience of the flow of consciousness, time in experience is not simply a matter of *explaining* it in terms of its continuity.

Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 420) points out Henri Bergson to have erred with his account of duration on this point. Consciousness of succession is not the same as a succession of consciousness - the apprehension of duration would itself require duration of apprehension to make any viable sense. To explain time in terms of continuity would be to confuse *past*, *present* and *future* on the excuse that we pass from one to another through imperceptible transitions - meaning it requires (or presupposes) another 'meta' time to view time and so risks denying time altogether. We experience time because we are, in effect, caught within it (Varela F. J., 1999).

Despite this understanding that we are somehow 'caught' within the present (for we cannot simply will ourselves to leave it) the fact that we seem to experience it as passing creates a difficulty - for how can time simultaneously pass and hold us? It seems that beyond the intuitively given experience we have of time, the manner of trying to explain the speciousness of a 'passing present' through philosophical i.e. written or verbal language leads one into all sorts of difficulties. As Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002, p.418) describes it, 'my present outruns itself in the direction of an immediate future and an immediate past and impinges upon them where they actually are, namely in the past and in the future themselves'. As an adjunct to this confusing state of affairs one can turn to Heidegger, for his equally enigmatic phenomenological description for how the *now*, understood as an *ek-stase*, is to be interpreted as a unity of past, present and future. Although not a consideration of flow as such, we can perhaps understand Heidegger's unique formulation as a continuity of sorts, where a future-becomes-the-past-by-coming-into-the-present



Temporalizing does not mean a “succession” of the ecstasies. The future is *not later* than the having-been, and the having-been is *not earlier* than the present. Temporality temporalizes itself as a future that makes present, in the process of having-been (Heidegger 1953/2010, p.334).

Despite the evident fluidity of thought within these written descriptions, it might be stated that they simply bring us back to the *aporia* of time as it stands. Temporality ‘temporalizing itself’, or the present ‘outrunning itself’ shows us something of the form of the problem, rather than its actual content. For an understanding of that, we have to go back to our own subjective experience of time and see if we can make it fit.

In view of the difficulty of these written descriptions, a question is raised - whether the manner in which ‘the present’ is *re-presented* as a concept for contemplation through written or verbal language might itself be a part of the difficulty? This brings me to the focus of this investigation – the question of how to express time. It is here that the purpose of drawing re-emerges – as an alternative way to re-present ‘the present’ in the form in which it is experienced.

## Practice

Edmund Husserl (1931/2012) worked hard on the problem of what he called present-time consciousness (the specious present) throughout his long career. In response to what were the clear difficulties of expressing an understanding through written language, he formulated a series of famous ‘time-diagrams’ in order to try to visualize what words had failed to do. These drawn diagrams were an attempt to try to square the circle of the specious present - that consciousness of succession cannot be the same as a succession of consciousness i.e. the paradox of seeming constancy *within* flow.



Beyond the meta-language so often employed within academic philosophy, including his own, Husserl’s time-diagrams seemed to offer the light of a new kind of visualization (de Warren 2009), providing an alternative glimpse into the peculiar space in which we already live. Inspired by the idea of producing time diagrams - a drawn representation of time essentially, using both lines and the spaces *between* lines - my practical investigations began to take shape.

My objective aim was to produce drawings that could combine the theoretical positions just outlined to produce diagrams *of* time. Practically speaking, my method to re-present the ‘passing’ of the present was based on employing rhythm, understood in both a spatial and a temporal sense. Rhythm can be found within our understandings of both time and space – indeed, it was on this basis that Henri Lefebvre (2004/2013) devised what he termed the practice of *rhythmanalysis*. This, the analysis of rhythms, was meant to

bring the topic of space and time back together as they are encountered within lived experience. But the use of rhythm might also accomplish the same task.

Rhythm on Lefebvre's account required three things. First it required *repetition*. No rhythm without repetition, in space and time. Yet within repetition, we find *difference* – always. Lastly, there is *measure* - the repetition must return (Lefebvre 2013, 16). No two encounters, experiences or 'lived instances' will ever be lived through in exactly the same manner, but they will always return. To this understanding we could add that no two drawn lines will ever be exactly the same either, in virtue of the fact that they were drawn.

Using a metronome to provide a linear temporal rhythm to draw with, and a square pad of paper to draw on, I proceeded to produce biro drawings that utilised all three elements of this criteria to re-present the passing of the present (time) via the (spatial) form of repetitively drawn lines. Each line was drawn 'in time' to the rhythm of the metronome. This rhythm measured a span of time between two beats that I called 'now'. I drew the lines in succession with one up/down movement of the hand, returning each stroke inside the measure of the page. The rhythmical spatial structure reflects the time that was taken up in drawing them, which was simultaneously laid down in the form of a line. If we think that one moment 'appears' after the next in succession then we can form a rhythm to the passing of the present (*now, now, now, now*), and this experience is what I tried to diagram via the act of drawing lines.

## Conclusion

But the analysis of time has not merely provided an opportunity of reiterating what had been said about the world. It throws light on the preceding analysis because it discloses subject and object as two abstract 'moments' of a unique structure that is *presence* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 430).

The specious quality to the present concerns the fact that our subjective presence appears to 'fill it', but not completely – something of us is always already passing away. Yet we feel ourselves to inhabit the present to a degree that our concepts of the past or the future do not seem to fully reflect. Instead, we encounter them within the duration of the moment in which we intuitively find ourselves to *be*. In stepping back from this close analysis of time and re-applying it to the drawings presented here, I find I am confronted with a new form of object. By



this I mean that each line in each drawing is understood to move as it stands - 'temporalizes itself' (Heidegger, 1953/2010) on the basis of the underlying quality of movement that underpins these drawings – because they were *drawn* (Rawson, 1969/1987). This knowledge indicates that temporality is found within the static form of the line because it is 'filled' with the subjective presence of a drawer.



Going beyond my own given authorship of these lines towards the indirect method for questioning the autographic line indicated earlier, consideration of these drawings engaged one final thought beyond the direct question of how they represent time. It begins with the realisation that although temporality is found within the line in the manner I have just described, this notion must transcend the question of attributing individual authorship based upon it. By this I mean that although all drawn lines must invariably re-present time (the time it took *someone* to draw) this act does not in itself guarantee 'who' that someone is. Despite this, the concern with drawing as, 'autography or graphological confession' (Rose, 1976, p. 14) remains immanent to drawing understood as a form of art.

This opposed form of movement - immanence in transcendence - found within the temporal structure of the line is itself an incisive comment on the nature of subjectivity in phenomenological terms (de Warren, 2009, p. 268). Put back into the context of drawing, this analysis suggests the idea of the drawn line as a straight 'confession' of subjective presence is a highly complex and perhaps ultimately misleading affair – hence, the *specious* line.



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