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BODY, BED AND BRIAN MASSUMI

Discussions about orientation, disorientation, dimensional loss, and metaphysical expansion

What is the role that movement plays in our perceptions and what happens if we try to remove the occasion of movement from our perceptive experience?

This paper draws primarily from Brian Massumi's book, *Parables for the Virtual* and uses my own physical resources: attending dance class by Ivan Wolfe, watching a performance by Ivana Müller, and observing myself lying in bed, as a context for Massumi's ideas.

The paper begins with me...in my bed...welcome...

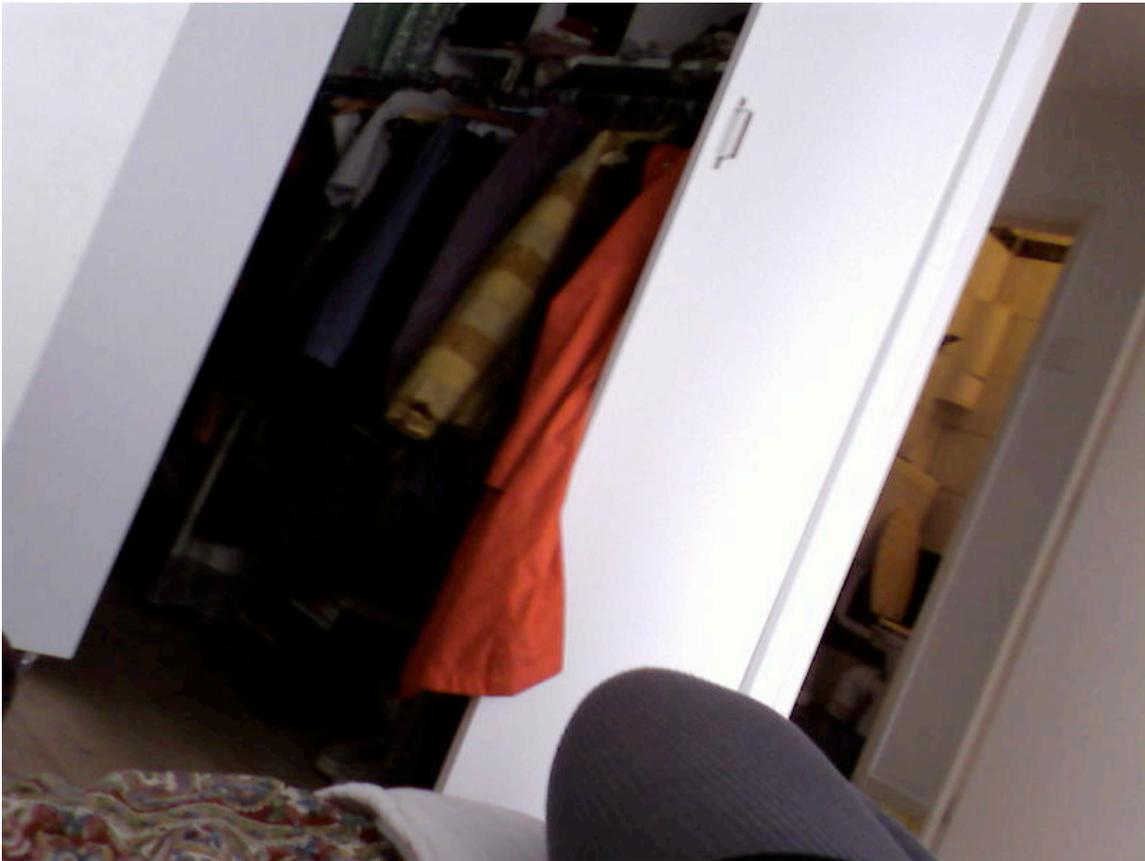
[Anecdote 1: 'visual perception' minus 'the bodies sense of itself']



Here I am. I'm lying in bed. It's 8am on a Thursday morning. Light is coming through the curtains on my right. I lie on my back with my right leg stretched toward the foot of the bed. My left knee is bent with my left foot resting into my right knee. This bent side is slightly inclined to the left – so my head is rolled left away from the curtains and facing the closet. I am still and my eyes take in the view of the inside of my closet.

I begin to think lying so still in the quiet of the morning that I am in a position where I could be disembodied – for a moment splitting my sensory inputs. Let's see if I can observe their nature separately.

I fix my eyes in the direction of the closet and try not to let my eyes roll around in my head. No movement, just try to evaluate the nature of my vision – minus the movement of my eye.



Things on the periphery of that frame are fuzzy, with out clear border, while the objects directly before have clear definition and difference. Also, I am wondering if the nature of my vision with my eyes fixed like this is flat. I know there is depth, foreshortening and panoramic curve, but is it my vision that tells me this? If I had never been here before, walked into this closet, laid on this bed, if somehow I was just transported and all I had were these fixed eyes – would I see depth?

In trying to work on this nature of vision, subtracting movement, and trying to separate the body from my experience, I become immediately aware of the opposite. My body, it's

placement, it's positioning, it's sense of being located in the room. Though I am completely still, I can feel how my left knee is bent and extending out away from my body and toward the interior of the closet. My right leg, like a planetary pole, points South toward the wall, and the back of my head toward the opposite wall. Though I haven't moved, just lying here and evaluating my body in relation to space, I realize that it is this sensation of placement and relation, the positioning of my body in relation to itself and in relation to the room that is providing information about shape, contour and texture. Additionally, the fact that I see my arm and knee in my visual frame, while, at the same time, I feel their direction, provides me with further information about depth and the spatial relations of which I am a part.

I, the condition of my body and all of its moveable and related components, make up the reality of my perception.

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In ***Parables for the Virtual***, movement represents a core component of Brian Massumi's philosophy. Movement is central to perceptive experience, to reality. Movement also holds the key to realities that escape conscious awareness - action, or internal stimulus, preceding the awareness of a taken action. In addition, there is dynamic flow between differences, a rhythmic motion that plays a role in each defining the other. The virtual and the actual, for example, are defined by the rhythmic folding and opening between past and future. Our perceived experience is part of this constant draw from the virtual deck - a full and vibrating pre-conscious space that creates our reality while we experience our last selection. Present doesn't really exist, or is rather an experience that is in constant flux between immediate future and immediate past.

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ORIENTATION

Dance and the body go particularly well with Massumi's ideas about orientation. A dancer is intimately aware of how shape, direction, flow - the bodies sense of itself in space - is a cognitive tool. Closer to an animal's reality, the dancer is intimately familiar with orientation from sense of shape and movement relation, an internal reference system that allows the body to understand itself within its environment.

This sense, the body's relation to itself in space, is called proprioception. Massumi recognizes proprioception as a sixth sense, and believes it is the primary sense for humans to orient in their environment. Visual perception is an external reference system that provides important information, but information that, by itself, can be deceptive.

Usually visual and proprioceptive senses function together so smoothly that their shared role in orientation goes unnoticed. Many would guess that visual memory is primary in daily activities such as getting to the grocery store, or going to work. Massumi would argue that these habitual and locative activities are remembered first in the body – the visual memory is laid out after the fact.

In his view the body is continually calculating its orientation according to landmarks and its own movement in the space. This is a relational kind of processing that resides in the movement. A landmark is very different than a visual map. It is a point in space that has to do with the traveling and arrival. In fact, it is a point that arises from the fact of travel, rather than the body navigating by putting together pre-calculated points. This idea is observed in animals. For example, Massumi observes this in ants: “Studies of the ant's ability to orient have shown that ‘path integration’ predominates in learning phases and that landmark use takes over for known territory.” (Endnote, Chapter 8, p. 286)

I once had a very concrete experience with this proprioceptive ‘sixth sense’ during a dance workshop in Amsterdam. This was a week series of classes taught by American born dancer, Ivan Wolfe. During the classes I became keenly aware of how the body's proprioceptive process relates with cognition.

Ivan structures his class through ‘movement research’. Most work is done on the floor and, similar to break dancing, challenges the body to work away from gravity. Ivan approaches his teaching through simple exercises that lead to large perceptual shifts of the body in relation to itself. For example, the class performs a simple exercise of moving while holding one foot. Though simple, moving suddenly relies on a very different logic. The back, head, elbows and ankles take on new roles. They are used as supports, and places from where to push and land. Vision does not work as well in orientation. In fact, when I tried to orient visually, I got dizzy or nauseous. The tactile pressures and new sensations of uncharacteristic body parts confronting the floor and the new relations between surfaces and limbs also created new paths. In addition, getting from a to b, required different sets of muscles. After five days, I felt headed toward a new body, reformed in its concept of how it relates to space. Re-orienting its landmarks, my body relearned itself and created a new model, based on new relations.

Mostly, in this process, I could only be concerned with travel and arrival, landmarks getting created in the form of new sensations of a body part and its redefined role with gravity. Visual perception was of little help in my body finding its way through this maze of new sensation.

In addition, I began to experience a philosophical shift in my ideas about locating myself in an environment. This could be compared with the perceptual shift of feeling the earth come to meet feet, rather than feet plodding to find the earth - except with more dimensionality. My joints bending and limbs pressing into the floor in this new way changed my understanding of the room. Yes my eyes still told that I was in a room with a piano in the corner and windows on two walls, but my physical relation to this space had shifted. My knowledge of floor, wall, door, ceiling, foot, hand, thigh, head, had made new relations.

My experience of navigating is comparative with Massumi's notions of orientation. The body achieves orientation, not by positioning itself properly, but rather position emerges from the conditions of the body moving through space. In recent studies it has been shown that humans orient better the 'emptier' the space. (p.180) This would support a notion of a cognitive process related to animals, a process more in line with orientation emerging through movement.

Massumi describes the idea of 'dead reckoning', a nautical term based on an animals ability to orient through movement. While walking through an environment, we can of course stop to put together a map of where we have traveled. This, however, is a different process, requiring mental effort. Massumi proposes: "Cognitive mapping takes over where orientation stops." (p. 180)

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DISORIENTATION

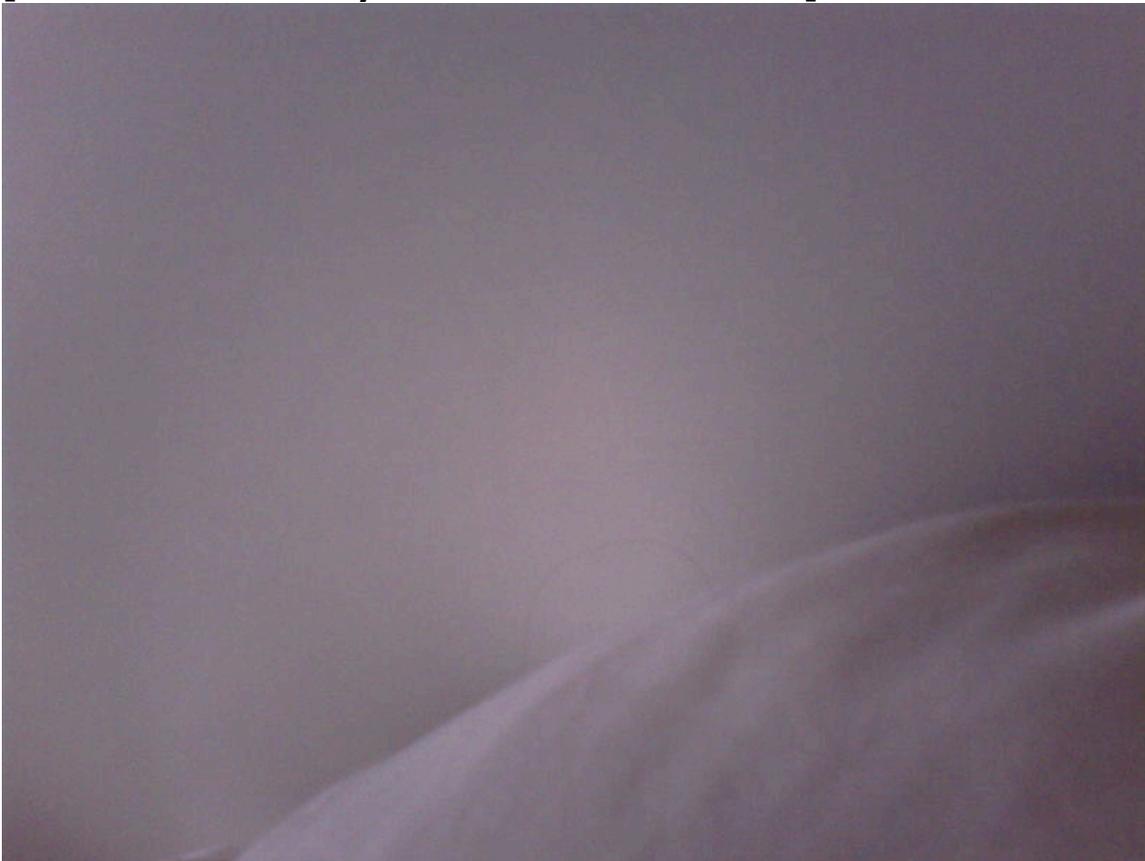
In Massumi's essay, *Strange Horizon* he shares a personal anecdote of getting lost with in his own work place – an example of movement and visual memory getting out of sync. When looking out his work window he believed to see a particular configuration of streets and buildings that would correlate with facing North. His actual facing was East. The day he realized his mistake he recalls,

“...I had the strangest sensation of my misplaced image of the buildings morphing, not entirely smoothly, into the corrected scene. My disorientation wasn't a simple lack of attention. I had been positively seeing a scene that wasn't there. It took a moment's effort to replace what positively hadn't been there with what plainly was.” (p. 178)

In Massumi's recollection, his body and sense of position had convinced him of his facing in space. In traveling through the twists and turns of the corridors Massumi used little in the way of visual references. His way was being found, and direction being calculated through his body's relation to itself. In addition, his visual reference system had become out of sync with his bodies' sense of travel. When he arrived to his office his body made him see visual information that was not there.

What is key in this story is Massumi's recalculation of the event. In retrospect he realized that while traveling through the interior of the building he used little to no visual memory. His recollection of how to get to his office was calculated in pacing, twists and turns of the body in relation to itself. (p. 179) Massumi makes an important discovery between the external reference system of vision and the internal calculations of proprioception. These represent two different ways of thinking in relation to the environment, cognitive processes that might not always provide the same results.

[Anecdote 2: The Body as Evidence of Dimension]



I'm interested in looking closer at this idea of getting lost. At what level the 'losing' actually happens. Let's return back to my bedroom, where I am busy trying to disassociate myself from my sense of the body in the space...

If, for a moment, I pull my limbs behind me, so they are out of my field of vision, try to still my eyes, separate the idea of my attached body, and wipe out my memory of being in this space, including my limbs memory of location, then vision is flat.

Even if, in this stillness, I take to rolling my eyes around in my head, it is very difficult to distinguish the experience of many flat frames of visual information unfolding in each moment to the sensations related to the spherical movements of the eyes rolling in the socket. These movements are directly linked to the visual field of information.

Furthermore, this sensation related to the structural and movement content of the eye is giving me direct tactile information about the nature of my 3D environment. Separate the head from the torso and you still have the sensation of spheres rolling in sockets. There is still evidence of a third dimension.

I do feel, lying here with my limbs awkwardly stretched behind me so they are not part of my visual field, that I can lose dimensionality. For a moment imagine myself with out a sense of myself. This is very strange indeed. Trying to remove all movement I lose the sensation of being able to put things together, I lose the ability to think...

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DIMENSIONAL LOSS

In the essay *Chaos and the Total Field of Vision*, Massumi gives an interesting example about how vision cannot be isolated from other sense perceptions. He uses the example of an experiment done in the early to mid-twentieth century when the field of psychology was interested in achieving a ‘Ganzfeld’ – or total field of vision. Researchers at the time were convinced that if they could isolate the physiological and physical components of vision by making experiments where white light was distributed evenly on the retina, than they could get to the secrets of ‘pure’ vision. However, instead of finding pure vision, what they discovered was a complete lack of seeing, as if the sense of vision itself had disappeared. Massumi reports the study:

One of the most striking anomalies that appeared was that subjects in whom pure vision was produced found it extraordinarily difficult to express what they saw “in terms usually associated with visual phenomena.”³ After prolonged exposure (ten or twenty minutes) subjects would even report difficulty sensing whether their eyes were open or closed.⁴ Vision would “blank out.”⁵ Pure visual experience resulted in a complete absence of seeing.” (p. 145)

These experiments not only resulted in a loss of vision as a sense, they also created other physical and psychological reactions.

“Various aftereffects...were found...[such as] fatigue and a feeling of great lightness of body. Motor coordination was reportedly poor, and observers had difficulty maintaining balance...One observer experienced temporary states of depersonalization.”⁷ (p. 145)

In reality, vision is always cooperating with other senses, it is “ a continuous feed and itself feeds into: hearing, touch, and proprioception....” (p. 145)

(p. 8, Brian, Bed and Brian Massumi)

It is interesting too, in light of the topic of 'getting lost' that the experiments caused disorientation in other functions of the body, and even, in one case a sense of 'depersonalization' a kind of loss of self. It's as if, with out movement, with out the senses folding into and out of each other in their habitual rhythm - a constant flux with an also moving environment, the body and the self become lost.

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Performance: How Heavy Are My Thoughts?



In a performance I saw recently by Ivana Müller (IM) for a conference called the Anatomical Theater Revisited in Amsterdam, Müller finds herself in a similar identity crisis, when she tries to treat her 'thoughts' as solid. Her performance is based on the question, "If my thoughts are heavier than usual, is my head heavier than usual?"

A hybrid frame of lecture performance, autobiographical portrait, philosophical quest and 'mockumentary', IM is present to the audience through text that she has written 'before' and pre-recorded video footage. Her story, a home-spun empirical inquiry into the weight of thoughts, is delivered to us by actor Bill Atchison.

As we watch video sequences of IM on a large screen, her text is read out loud by Atchison. IM is engaged with experiments such as: weighing the weight of her head, entering an empty room and reading the thoughts that remained in pre-placed and then removed objects, and observing her increasingly heavy thoughts as she consumes, glass by glass, a bottle of Vodka. In this last experiment, her thoughts prove so heavy that it brings her entire body to the floor – resting heavy under a table.



‘heavy thoughts’

‘light thoughts’

The video also shows IM conducting interviews with professionals in the fields of psychology, philosophy and neurology. She goes as far as having a CAT scan to see if her brain changes along with the nature of her thoughts. Of these interviews, philosopher Bojana Kunst seems to provide IM with the wisest advice when she suggests that trying to understand thoughts in this fixed way could make someone crazy.

The video cuts to IM running nude through a field, somewhere in Holland. It is very green and sunny. A few sheep, that are also in the field, seem unmoved by IM’s madness. She has become wildly undone as a result of trying to understand ‘thoughts’ from a perspective of ‘stagnancy’. Thoughts are, by nature, slippery and continuously in flux.

One has the sense that as IM tries to further distill her thoughts through empirical testing, the more opened, wild, unleashed she becomes. In trying to distill a point she is in fact coming to a vast and inconceivable opening.

Additionally, this work has a very unique structure. Ivana Müller creates a dynamic tension between her image, her words, and her lack of presence. Because of these split relationships in the delivery of media, the flatness of the construction (a video projected on a flat screen and a man behind a desk facing the audience) actually creates the effect of roundness and movement. The delivery of the work is doing all of those things which IM’s ‘thoughts’ are not, namely, making key relational shifts to create movement and dimension.

In *The Brightness Confound* Massumi discusses relationship between color and brightness. He describes the situation of a philosopher scrutinizing a table, trying to distinguish one color. We may call the table red. But once we try to isolate exactly what red, or where it is, we get confounded by the patches of brightness, the shifting tones, it becomes impossible to identify a consistent red, or even a spot that remains the same.

Massumi writes:

“The philosopher, staring pensively at the table in front of him, begins to unsee things, things he has seen and the color of which he knows. When he looks more closely, he notices that there is a gap between what he has *seen* and his *seeing*. If he concentrates on what is actually before him at the moment of his seeing, the certainty of what he has seen dissolves. He can no longer say what color any given thing on the table is.” (p. 162)

Here too, there is movement, but this time it is a movement of relation. It is also a relation that exists as part of a whole. Massumi identifies the nature of colors as part of a ‘total field’. They exist in relation to each other. He points out, “As anyone who has dressed themselves knows, ‘we judge colors by the company they keep’.” (p. 163)

For Massumi, colors not only exist in relation to each other, creating color sensations through their mutual exchange. He also points out that if they are isolated from each other they become “unstable, and even imperceptible in isolation.” (p. 163)

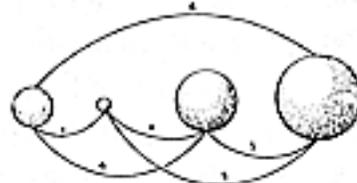
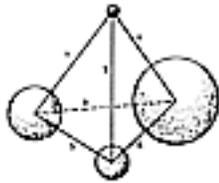
Massumi’s argument again challenges ‘fixed’ models, like color theories that have emerged from Newtonian theories of vision. (Endnote, Chapter 7, p. 284) In his view, the only constant that can be made regarding color has to do with correlation. “What is singular about color is the relationality of its ever-varying appearing.” (p.163)

It is at this point that Massumi begins to make an important philosophical distinction - between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’. (See Endnote #1) With the idea of an absolute, there is movement contained within this space that cannot be determined. It is movement in relation to itself. Its very nature is that it is resistant to generalization. The moment you split it up, observe it in its components, compare and contrast, measure, then it enters into the realm of relativity. It is externalized.

Here, in the essay *The Brightness Confounds*, the example extends to spectrums of color, and the impossibility of separating colors. Their singularity relies on an absolute relationship of indeterminacy. We can split them up, but in doing so we destroy the very nature of color sensation, in a sense we are losing essence, over cognitive interpretation.

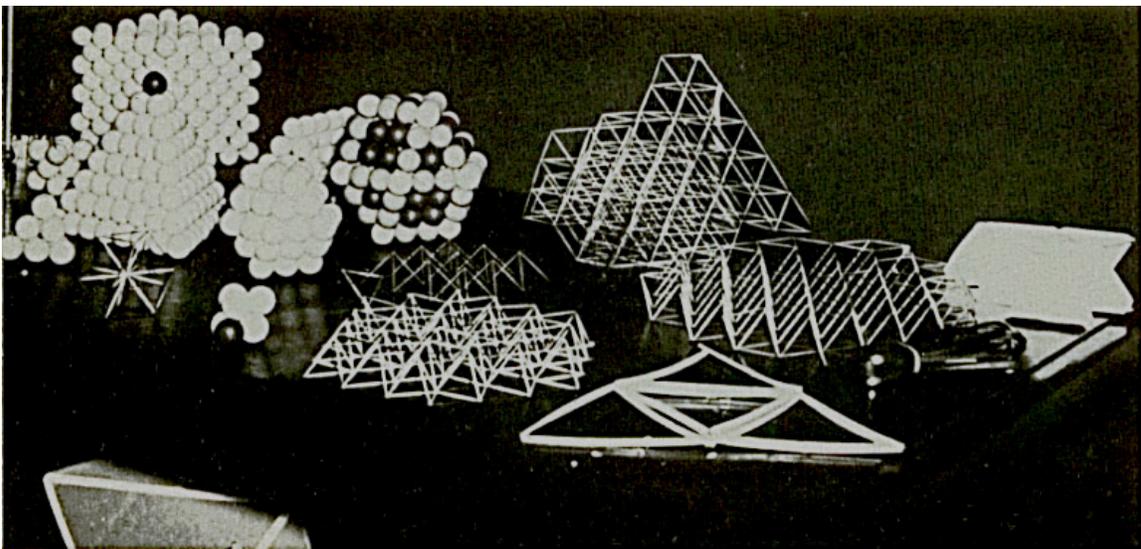
(p. 11, Brian, Bed and Brian Massumi)

There is a prop used commonly in Alexander technique and also Skinner Release Technique to describe the way each aspect of the body relates and mutually affects the other as a whole. The prop is a three dimensional toy, made of small uniform wooden sticks with balls on each end that are interconnected with stiff elastic. If you pull one of the balls away from center than the entire system adjusts, each part of the figure is affected. This figure, has come to be associated with an invented word, tensegrity, that is made by making a contraction of the words ‘tensional’ and ‘integrity.’



“Tensegrity describes a structural-relationship principle in which structural shape is guaranteed by the finitely closed, comprehensively continuous, tensional behaviors of the system and not by the discontinuous and exclusively local compressional member behaviors. Tensegrity provides the ability to yield increasingly without ultimately breaking or coming asunder.”

- Richard Buckminster Fuller (excerpt from *Synergetics*, 700.011.)



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The body, the structural anatomy of muscles, bones, organs, fluids, etc., function this way as well. They represent a closed system that maintains a relational balance with in itself. In Alexander and Skinner Technique, the health and freedom of the system rely on an awareness of this ongoing continuity and comprehensive notion of a moving and mutually affecting whole.

(p. 12, Brian, Bed and Brian Massumi)

It is possible that we make a case for tensional behaviors between the senses, relating this 3D model of tensegrity to Massumi's story about the impossibility of a pure and 'total field of vision'. We could apply the cooperative relationship between the senses to this 3D toy. If we were to cut away one of the wooden pieces, the way vision was cut away by distributing white light evenly on a retina, the entire model would crumble out of the third dimension - each part losing its natural relation of the other. It would fall out of its identity as a 3D object of tensional integrity.

The identity loss is similar, and, it is also interesting that it is coupled with a dimensional loss, or rather, a lack of being able to comprehend itself.

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METAPHYSICAL EXPANSION

To get back to Massumi's accounts of pure vision, after realizing that vision functions collaboratively with other senses, the researchers of the Ganzfeld project decided to add "controlled stimulation in other sense modalities." (Massumi, 146) The result was even more far out than before. Patients reported long hallucinations. They fell completely out of experience. Clouds and fogginess were common words used to describe their experience, and in one case a person reported seeing "levels of nothingness." (p. 146)

Massumi uses this patient's report to jump into an argument of indeterminacy. As these researchers tried to isolate a fixed point they found themselves looking at something that could not be determined, but still could be differentiated "levels of nothingness" – one nothing differentiated from the next. They also found that as they approached a certain limit, they were dealing with infinitely more complexity.

Massumi relates this to the way a mathematical curve approaches but never reaches a line:

A limit is not a boundary. It is open. It is a point that a curve infinitely approaches but never reaches. Except that it is not a point, because it is never arrived at. The limit of a two-dimensional curve is "pointlike," just as the limit of vision, populated by bounded three-dimensional objects is "surfacelike." The limit is in a different dimension. More precisely, it lacks determinate dimensionality so it can only be described as being "like" one of the determinable dimensionalities characterizing the movement it governs. For that is exactly what the limit does: govern a movement. (p. 147)

Massumi goes on to talk about how the two exist abstractly with each other, the limit and the curve, but makes the argument that though it is abstract it is not unreal. It is what he calls “existentializing.” (p. 147) It is the approaching of the curve to the limit that gives the curve a function. The two are able to exist, the one because of the other. “The limit is not unreal. It is virtual. It is reality giving.” (p. 147)

In dance, especially with improvisation, we are always talking about being in the moment. We prepare the body for listening to impulses that come in, maybe before we are conscious of them. We learn to respond to energy waves, intentions and traces. We also become fully aware of our hearing, how the light falls and changes when a body passes, the textures and temperatures of a room, air and other bodies.

But what is this moment in fact? It is impossible to define it as a point, because it is continuous and ongoing, it is a process. And also to call it a line, the way we see a timeline progress doesn't quite work, because we are in constant flux between what just happened and what will happen – we are dancing one sensation, while we also listen for the next.

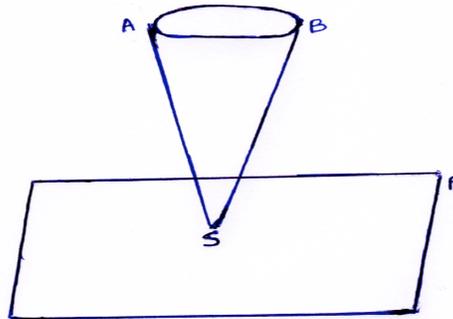


Fig. 4, Chapter 3, Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory (1896)

The late 19th and early 20th century philosopher, Henri Bergson describes this moment, or ‘the present’, as a ‘sensori-motor’ point (‘S’) that is constructed by a rhythmic relationship between ‘pure memories’ of the past and the body’s instantaneous habitual memory constructed moment to moment. This moment is consciousness, and is represented by a roaming point whose creation is in dynamic relation with the past. In his book *Matter and Memory*, Bergson describes:

For that a recollection should reappear in consciousness, it is necessary that it should descend from the heights of pure memory down to the precise point where action is taking place. In other words, it is from the present that comes the appeal to which memory responds, and it is from the sensori-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life. (Bergson, p. 197)

(p. 14, Brian, Bed and Brian Massumi)

Massumi takes this a step further by claiming that there is no present. Instead, the present is constantly passed over due to a lag in human cognition.

In the essay, *The Autonomy of Affect*, he discusses a cognitive gap of a half a second from the beginning of a bodily event (recorded by an EEG machine, monitoring electronic shifts occurring at the scalp) and its completion in a human action – in this case, the flexing of a finger. Participants in this test, conducted in the early 80's by a researcher, Benjamin Libet, were asked to record the moment they made a decision to flex their finger. The results of the test showed a .2 second lag between the decision to flex, and the actual event of flexing the finger. But, additionally, and more staggering, is the fact that .3 seconds before the recorded 'conscious decision to act' was an electronic shift registering on the scalp – changing the notion that consciousness initiates an action, but instead is a result of it.

Libet proposes that “we may exert free will, not by initiating intentions but by vetoing, acceding or otherwise responding to them after they arise.” In other words, the half second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull, in excess of the actually-performed action and of its ascribed meaning. (Massumi, p. 29)

With Massumi, it seems, our consciousness of an event, is the result of an autonomic event in the body, electrodes communicating directly to action and consciousness coming later. Our consciousness of the event is in the past of the bodily event. It's as if the present is wiped out with the lag time between the body doing and the brain or consciousness becoming aware. This event connotes a cancellation. The virtual is ongoing, and the body is constantly selecting, bring our reality. We become conscious of it, while a new one is ever created. In Massumi's words, “...pastness opening directly onto a future, but with no present to speak of, for the present is lost with the missing half second, passing too quickly to be perceived, too quickly, actually, to have happened.” (p. 30)

With Massumi, words like folding, weaving and feeding are important. There are bleeds between the virtual and the actual. It is the idea of abstractness, the fact that we use the abstract as a reference point that proves it as reality giving. This abstract, or virtual eventfulness that is beyond our experience, but inextricably linked with our reality, it, as a mathematical constant, is what 'governs its movement' like a curve approaching an abstract line or limit. The limit only exists to move the curve into infinite. Its creation continues, because of the limit – indefinitely.

ENDNOTES

1. I get the sense that his argument marks the paradigm shift between Einsteins theory of relativity and the more chaotic and indeterminate model of quantum physics. With Einstein, relativity that is “predicated on a standard. The relative co-occurs with the general or the universal.” (Massumi, p.164)

SOURCES

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