

Some Attempts To Order Force

A miscellany in progress by Lucy Cash

*A Butterfly, A Moth; Two Large Rocks, Improbably Balanced;
A Glacier; A Meteoric Shower; A Geophysical Observatory.*

1. *Imagination*

I have gradually gathered this set of glass photographic slides as images to hold, and to look at and through. And as ways to think about some particular experiences of daily life.

For some time, alongside many others for whom moving offers a particular way of exploring ideas, I've been considering what it might mean to 'think choreographically'. To distinguish the knowledge I've gathered experientially - but not categorized academically - and to wonder what it is about an experience of moving and being moved that seems to offer a useful approach to other, non-dance parts of life.

I've been considering these questions without trying to find conclusions.

One thought that occurs to me is this: moving and watching movement in real time and with actual bodies connects cause to effect; effort to manifestation. And it connects memory to imagination, and touch to sight.

As conscious animals that think and imagine, human beings are constantly involved in a moment-to-moment activity whose process is hidden and yet all-pervasive. Every thought that I have is a process that generates or inhibits action. It doesn't occur for me in this way because if I think about my thoughts at all they seem like something abstract and invisible in my mind or imagination, whereas the actions that I take seem visible and concrete.

For at least the past century, generations of dancers and movement practitioners have been quietly gathering knowledge about the relationships between moving, imagining and understanding. This knowledge has until recently only been visible as part of the kind of skillful decision-making that underpins acts of creative thought and empathetic response. However we now officially 'know' from neurological studies that our embodied responsiveness to that which we merely think and perceive is a profoundly embodied experience and that even when I only imagine myself performing a series of movements, the muscles needed to make these movements register activity. Similarly if I give attention to watching someone else performing a movement, a layer of myself can experience that movement too.

Even at a distance, as I watch the recorded precision of, say, a lip-sync artist, or I hear the sound of an absent voice through headphones, I still register the impact; I'm connected to their effort. These performed gestures involve me in their process alongside those of many other, unperformed gestures that I encounter in daily life, whether I'm caught by the unexpected rhythm of builders constructing scaffold, the serious delight of a child at play, or a pleasing pattern of speech in an overheard conversation.

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2. Attention

Whilst all processes involve cause and effect, not all processes are equal in the time they take. And increasingly life is split between what we might call an analogue experience of time and a digital one. For instance if I want to walk across the room I still have to get up and walk across the room. It takes the time it takes and is no faster than a similar human being in a similar room a hundred years ago. But if I want to save information, I no longer have to handwrite words, or print out paper copies in real-time, instead my hard drive will write the information to itself in zeros and ones using magnetic storage. This happens so fast that I barely register that my computer is involved in a process. I just expect it to happen instantaneously.

My daily experience of time is thrown backwards and forwards between these different processes: the time it takes me to perceive information and take an action and the time it takes the machines I use to do the same. I recognize that at some level this causes a kind of bodily or felt confusion, and a lessening of my capacity to tolerate or accept delay without anxiety – that is, *patience*. And yet, it's not that machines = always fast, and bodies = always slow. Our bodies are capable of incredible acts of internal speed, like 'prehension' - those movements in which the body acts in advance of information arriving through our senses. Those moments in which we know before we know.

Sometimes this felt confusion might seem to lie in the tendency towards abstraction that characterizes current technology. For instance, I can relate to the chemical process of light on photographic paper and the image it creates because I've spent time with the materiality of things; whereas I don't relate to the writing of a digital image on an SD card. (*What does that look, smell or sound like?*)

Understanding a process allows me to feel a connection between myself and the thing that's produced, and alongside this it offers me the possibility of empathy – both of which enrich my experience of everyday life. But there are many analogue processes I don't understand and yet I respect them for the time they take, I don't resent them for the time they 'steal.'

How much is this experience of being in-between determined by the specific time I've lived through?

How will we relate ourselves to the world around us when digital processes are the only kind we're familiar with?

Where / what will our body/ies be?

3. Force

Force is an everyday phenomenon that is intimately connected to both the virtual, (or abstract), and the actual; and it intervenes in many aspects of human experience.

Force is related to both stillness and movement, to the seen and unseen. Forces can change the shape of an object, accelerate or stop an object and change the path of its movement.

The first time I really thought about force as an occurrence – as a thing you can see – was in a physics lesson aged eleven, when I was asked to consider magnetic force. There was a very satisfying edge of quiver, a vibration of push and pull as I held the heavy u-shaped magnet and improvised a dance with some helplessly obedient iron filings.

At about this time some other choreographies of gravity were revealed to me: that when you throw a ball in the air, its mass and the Earth's mass attract one other, which leads to a force between them. As the ball falls back towards the Earth, the Earth accelerates towards the ball and yet because the movement of the Earth towards the ball is so small, it's hidden - invisible to our eyes.

This same gravitational force is the one that the moon exerts on the sea, conducting the ebb and flow of tides on either side of the earth. The ocean facing the moon swells with a desire to reach it, whilst that on the opposite side of the earth is left swooning, falling away. Meanwhile the earth – the third partner in the dance – pulls away from the ocean and towards the moon.

There were other forces that lurked in the background of my childhood imaginations: the unseen or explosive forces. For instance, the huge force generated as the tectonic plates of the Earth move towards one another creating enough pressure on its crust to cause a mountain to form; or the trigger that detonates an explosive weapon at a distance. Forces can be both 'countable' and 'uncountable'. The kind of force that is uncountable is that which is used to attack, control or constrain. The fission or fusion of nuclear weapons.

The images that sit alongside this writing are photographic – produced through exposure to light and then printed on glass slides. Glass itself, over time, reveals its gravitational list – although these slides, which are only around one hundred years old or less, still give the appearance of a uniform materiality. Sometimes, when I think about the millions of photographic images that have been captured since the ability to use light to fix an image was developed, I think about the trace of attention underlying each one. The force of the person looking that decided *this* moment and not *that*, *here* and not *there*.

In her essay, 'The Death of A Moth' Virginia Woolf, describes the last moments of a dying moth and what they reveal to her. She writes:

"The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane..... Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life."

Looking at these images, I think about the relationship to power that is implicit in force. This power that we do or do not have over ourselves and the world around us. The power that explicitly shapes our lives in ways that are both visible and invisible.