

COLLISION

On Consciousness-with and
Virtual Lines of Affection

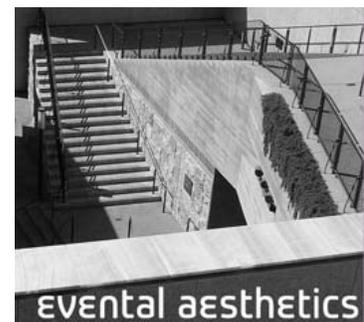
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ABSTRACT

If we wish to think experience primarily as a relational dimension in which dynamic forces are activated, then we may need to conceive the body as both a crossroads and a threshold across which events burst forth. First, the body is a crossroads of virtual lines of affection where consciousness becomes a with-ness in which bodies-things-percepts-sensations collide: intertwined movements of becoming. But it is also a threshold because the body is a multidimensional place where events are reported – or not. Like a black hole, it is constantly attracting affectivities and engulfing them: it is affected by its surroundings. But what becomes of these affectivities? The body is not just a black hole; it is also a musical instrument: it resonates with its surrounding, emitting affective forces through the pulsation of its presence. The body is affected as much as it affects its situation. To conceive experience as an aesthetic process contributes to an acknowledgement of the affective dimension of experience in the process of communication, thus allowing sense to be felt as an event.

KEYWORDS

Consciousness
Perception
Relation
Affect
Virtual



On Consciousness-With

To begin with, a “simple” question: what is consciousness, and where is it located? In my work, I put great emphasis on conceiving the human body as a plane of emergence of aesthetic qualities. I refer to it, inspired by Erin Manning, as a becoming-body.¹ By this expression I mean that the body is not a materiality linked to a predetermined identity. Instead, I conceive the human body as an *organism that persons*. To illustrate how “person” may function as a verb, Arakawa and Gins explain that “other types of organisms dog, giraffe, or cockroach the world.”² These examples allow us to better grasp “being” as a movement: namely, a becoming. Action is intrinsic to it: “being” is a “doing.” What is it that the becoming-body is doing? Moving and sensing: basically, experiences are happening. There is no such thing as a witness-consciousness but only movement and becoming sensing itself. In the essay “Does ‘Consciousness’ exist?”, William James conceptually addressed what we today call *embodiment* by suggesting experience as a synonym for consciousness.³ He argues that although consciousness and body may be considered as contrasted to each other in philosophy (as in “spirit and matter” or “soul and body”), this dualism is out of balance as long as consciousness stands for an entity. He insists instead in consciousness as a function: knowing. In this context, consciousness ceases to be considered as an abstract fixed substance acting as a witness of the events happening to the body. What is at stake here is the relationality of the body as a set of *pure experiences*, a relational field. Therefore what is being put forward is a care for the processual continuity of “thoughts” and “things” instead of their classic distinction as separate entities.

If consciousness is experience, then the entire becoming-body is consciousness. As experience, consciousness is a relational dimension of the becoming-body: a *consciousness-with*. When we are swimming, for example, we experience a dynamic unity of “being together” as an attunement of rhythms and movements that produces a merging-with experience. What happens here is relation emerging, and we may say that *Flow* is the force activated by the being-with-water experience. Therefore the concept *consciousness-with* attempts to attend to the relational dimension of experience. It assumes the point of view of the relation as a point of coagulation, entanglement, and subjectivity as it has been foregrounded in process philosophy by authors such as William James, A. N. Whitehead, and more recently Brian Massumi, Erin Manning, and Arakawa and Gins, who take relation as their starting point. In James’ terms, this centrality of relation is what defines “radical empiricism” as opposed to classical empiricism, which starts from discrete entities. As such, the idea being articulated here is not about a general oceanic flow that would direct the movements of the body

immersed in it. More specifically, *Flow* refers to the singular quality emerging in that situation as relationality.

The perception of immersion arises not only through the activity of all my five senses but also through a sixth one—or we could say through a virtual complement to what is actually happening perceptually. Here, “virtual” is not opposed to “actual” but should be understood as a dimension of experience which is felt in the body and at all moments present as potential. In fact, as Alfred North Whitehead points out, our sense-perception is always fused with *non-sensuous perception*:

In human experience, the most compelling example of non-sensuous perception is our knowledge of our own immediate past. I am not referring to our memories of a day past, or of an hour past, or of a minute past. Such memories are blurred and confused by the intervening occasions of our personal existence. But our immediate past is constituted by that occasion, or by that group of fused occasions, which enters into experience devoid of any perceptible medium intervening between it and the present immediate fact. Roughly speaking, it is that portion of our past lying between a tenth of a second and half a second ago. It is gone, and yet it is here. It is our indubitable self, the foundation of our present existence.⁴

Non-sensuous perception refers to a wider aspect than our sense-perception. It senses the background and the foreground of an actual experience, fusing all this data into a singular feeling: the *affective tone* of a situation.⁵ This wider aspect of perception allows us to think consciousness-with through two facets: multiplicity and virtuality.

At the contact of water, the becoming-body holds to that situation as it responds to it. In this context, the verb “to hold” is indebted to the writings of Arakawa and Gins, particularly as it is used in *Architectural Body* where they develop a theory of perception. The latter aims to attend to relationality’s full potential as it has the power to reconfigure life. Their main concept, *landing site*, refers to the fact that every perception lands (as a process) on a defined site (situation). This landing is an act of apportioning out, in other words, a sorting out (Whitehead would call it prehension) of experience. Every perception is a landing site, “each holding of the world equaling a landing-site configuration.”⁶ Thus, as the becoming-body holds to the being-in-the-water situation, the movements that run through the whole relational event provide support for the floating situation. At a virtual level, they are attuned to the relationality between the becoming-body and the element water as virtual lines of affection allowing this relational event to emerge. The consequence of this relationality is the Flow as a center where sensations, perceptions, emotions, and lines of tension (as floating-sinking and other forces) collide. Thus, the relational event hosts a multiplicity. There is a virtual crowd swarming here, which is endowed with a common objective: the event. There is no

simple, dualistic relation between water and a becoming-body. Instead, there is a more-than-human situation arising through the holding together of a relational complex. The Flow is this more-than-human situation. It is a relational event: a singularity emerging through experience which carries an affective tone. The event is the real subject of the relation, the being of relation. This is why I call it a more-than-human situation. The becoming-body contributes to its existence but is not its main element: this is why I speak of a consciousness-with. It is this activity of co-creation between the becoming-body and water that allows the Flow to emerge as a singularity. The multiple affective memories of the being-in-the-water situation are sensed in the becoming-body as a felt synthesis of these virtual lines of affection. Its complexity expresses itself in experience as an aesthetic quality. When aesthetics is understood from a relational point of view, we see the becoming of experience as an ontogenetic process of in-formation of felt qualities. In this regard, it is “aesthetic in its multidimensionality.”⁷ How does this happen?

The Becoming-Body as a Crossroads: Becoming-Actual

As the becoming-body jumps into the water, the sensation on the skin activates water-affective memories. There is a gathering of virtual lines of water-affection emerging as the immersion-event happens. These multiple being-in-the-water affective memories arise in experience to gather heterogeneously as a *passive synthesis*.⁸ They are passive because they are not actively operated but gathered in an emergent holding together that is aligned by the event as it happens. As Henri Bergson describes the interpenetration of affective memories, he affirms that they self-organize to penetrate each other as the notes of a melody do, forming thus a qualitative multiplicity.⁹ This multiplicity of virtual lines of water-affection subsists as part of a virtual dimension of the becoming-body: I call it *affective-consciousness*. Every time a becoming-body is immersed in water, an affective memory of a being-in-the-water situation is registered as experience. Each affective memory acts as a complex, oscillating *virtual line of affection* in experience. Within every immersion-situation, there is the emergence of a *real potentiality*: sensations, perceptions, emotions, floating-sinking, and other forces coming together into a certain *conditioned indetermination*.¹⁰ In this specific situation, the real potentiality finds its determination as the Flow. This emergence of potentiality befitting the becoming of the immersion-event is conditioned by affective memories combined with the law of gravity, the capacity of the becoming-body to float, among other human and non-human conditioning forces. This real potentiality arising through the experience of being-with-water becomes tangible as relationality. In the

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emergence of relationality, the water-affective-memories arising through the contact of water throw themselves towards the actualization of experience. At the contact of water they are all here, present in experience, so ready to forge the singularity ready to bloom. These are the virtualities of the relational complex. The consequence of the relationality that they compose is the Flow as a virtual center where multiple conditioning forces co-create the event. Consciousness-with is thus the co-creation of relationality and is located not only everywhere in the becoming-body but also “in” the event. Understanding the relational complexity of the Flow’s emergence allows us to better grasp the virtual movement of becoming-actual in act.

As it is very difficult to discern one single experience, we could refer to it as a constellation of events.¹¹ Events constantly burst into existence by passing through our becoming-bodies as cars come and go on highways. Every event that blooms in our actuality brings forth into existence a highway: a virtual line of affection, which is in fact an affective multiplicity. This *movement of actualization* lies at the core of the fact of being alive.

At any given moment, singularities are coming into existence with the potential to actualize aesthetic qualities by affecting becoming-bodies. When I am in the water, for instance, the temperature of that environment is affecting me. There is as well a characteristic smell that drives my senses to a specific feeling. Perhaps a “soothing sensation” is coming to my awareness? The sound of the waves adds to this sensorial symphony a note of lullaby. What about that deep turquoise color unique to the Caribbean’s tropical beaches? Is there a word to express the feeling of overwhelming well-being granted by such a situation? A word is never enough because in the event there is so much happening at the same time. Every micro-event composing a Sea-event acts as a virtual line of affection — or in other words, multiple intertwined movements of becoming. Here, bodies-things-percepts-sensations collide in a with-ness. They combine with virtual affective memories to bring forth the singularity of the actual event.

The Becoming-Body as a Threshold: Becoming-Virtual

So to speak, something extraordinary happens: experience. The becoming-body in this consciousness-with event gathers a multiplicity of virtual lines of affection into one singular complex feeling: the being-with-water experience. In Whitehead’s vocabulary, we would say that the process through which this complex feeling emerges consists in the water experiencing itself as an *actual occasion*: “the final

real things of which the world is made up.”¹² Thus, even though the becoming-body is a crucial aspect of the process, this microscopic view of the event does not consider the human element to be the subject of the process but a catalytic agent. The subject becomes then the event experiencing itself through the actualization of a singular affective tonality. In the process of experiencing, the becoming-body engulfs small details through a movement that virtualizes what had been brought forth into actualization. It does not disappear: it subsists as affective-memories (potentialities for other Sea-event situations). These bits of experience pass through the becoming-body as they would reach an event horizon. It means that the becoming-body acts as the threshold of an affective black hole attracting these virtual lines of affection for creative purposes. As Massumi states, “there is an incorporeal dimension of *the body*. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct.”¹³ This incorporeal dimension, *affective-consciousness*, subsists through a myriad of passive synthesis: the coming together as a relational field of affectivities emerging through the event. What then becomes of these affectivities? As much as there is an action of the water-system on the becoming-body, there is also a simultaneous “being-with” of the becoming-body that acts upon the water-system. Relation. By vibrating the relation-tonality (relationality), the becoming-body brings a complex of feelings-sensations-emotions to existence: an immersion-event happens. The being-with of this immersion situation produces a *differenciation* in the most basic action of the becoming-body: the pulsation of its presence.¹⁴ This pulsation is constantly slightly changing to harmonize itself with the aesthetic qualities of its environment. The becoming-body feels these affective tonalities as it co-creates them: that is consciousness-with. This very act is an attunement that constantly adjusts and vibrates affectivity. In this sense, we could call the becoming-body a musical instrument. What is the music that it is playing?

Reflective and Affective-Consciousness: A Delicate Dance

The becoming-body is always emanating affect. The latter can be felt but not named as affect is a non-verbal language. Irrevocably though, we try to grasp—retrospectively—what happened. We make sense of experiences by looking backwards. I call the dimension of the becoming-body that undertakes this mission the *reflective-consciousness*. It brings affect into action in the world by transforming what is felt into deeds, words, and actions, purpose, and focus. It is a

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simultaneous translation: such a delicate cooperation runs through affective and reflective-consciousness that one is always holding some power over the other. The power of affecting and being affected binds them together.¹⁵ Reflective-consciousness is always looking for focus. However, in experience, there is too much affective information, no linearity at all, and mandatory heterogeneousness. How do we make sense of that? We get a grip onto the emergent singularity, which we grasp in the form of aesthetic qualities that together convey a single affective tone.

What is the affective tone being played by the becoming-body-instrument? In the same way different sounds rhythmically organize themselves through the composition of a harmony, as Bergson notes, experience's affective becoming gathers the situation's real potentiality into one single affective tone: a felt aesthetic quality.¹⁶ Forged by relationality through an activity of co-creation between the becoming-body and its environment, the Flow is animated by its own becoming-affective tonality. This is the being of relation; it is the real subject of the Sea-event. How may we describe a harmony? The same difficulty applies to felt experience. Although we might attempt to describe the Sea-Event as a "soothing sensation," words cannot convey the complexity of a feeling. 

Notes

- 1 Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
- 2 Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins, *Architectural Body* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 1.
- 3 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003).
- 4 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 181.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 6 Arakawa and Gins, *Ibid.*, 81.
- 7 As proposed by Brian Massumi in *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 25.
- 8 On this concept, see David Lapoujade, “Le nombre obscur de la durée” in *Puissances du temps: versions de Bergson* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968), 27–51; and Gilles Deleuze, “Repetition for Itself” in *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 70–128.
- 9 Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 78.
- 10 “Real potentiality” and “conditioned indetermination” are theorized in more detail in Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 23.
- 11 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 35.
- 12 Whitehead, *Process*, 18.
- 13 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2002), 5.
- 14 In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze proposes the term differentiation as a genuine creation, 212. It is in this sense that “pulsation” must be understood: a process of always renewed being-with.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962).
- 16 Bergson, *Données Immédiates*, 79.

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