

**When Capture Incarnates by Will Johncock**

Spatial Conditions

The body, according to Anne Scott Wilson's photographic exhibition *Fly Rhythm*, is the conduit of visual experience. What can we take from this? Seemingly, that it is from a bodily space and perspective that the photographer perceives the world, a world of spatial objects, to be photographed. Likewise, being bodied conditions the perspective someone has of the space captured in the consequent, subsequent photograph.

That term "captured," prevalent in photographic vernacular, indicates something at stake in the photographic act besides these spatial relations. In capturing not only space but also time photography seemingly adheres to a temporality in which the subject-photographer illuminates a worldly space—a scene of spatial objects—which pre-exist their photographic representation. The consequent photograph, and the time that it captures, similarly pre-exist any viewing of it. The photograph already exists in order that it can be subsequently viewed, does it not? It is when considering these assumptions whilst viewing Wilson's photography, however, that the following inquiry regarding spatial and visual temporality emerges:

Is the photograph of a worldly scene, of an object-space, subsequent to that scene/space?

In-itself Space?

The notion that an object-space—a scene that is photographed—pre-exists, antecedent to its photographic representation, pre-supposes a spatial object as a thing in-itself, securely separate from other things (including the human-subject; the photographer). The "thing in-itself" is a legacy of sceptical and epistemological philosophies, which explore the conditions of human knowledge of the world. For knowledge to be objective, the object being studied must be outside the interference of the human inquirer and other spatial entities. Indeed, following Newtonian mechanics, objectivity demands that no two spatial entities occupy the same space simultaneously.

Glancing at Wilson's *bruny #1* illustrates this last point, where we perceptually manage object-spaces—the blue of the sky, the green of the trees, the grey of the road—by interpreting them as being distinguishably juxtaposed (for example, sky *between* trees). This coheres with our conception of spatial arrangement, that objects must occupy different spaces at any point in time. Where one object-space is present all others are absent. *bruny #1* captures one of these points in time by freezing spatial relations, for when apprehended simultaneously each space is petrified side-by-side with the others.



Anne Scott Wilson, *bruny #1*, Digital pinhole image, 2013.

At more than a glance though, the shimmering movement evoked by the blurry lines of *bruny #1* makes one wonder; is there another rhythm between spaces that *Fly Rhythm* indicates?

#### Timing of Space(s)

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty assists in exploring the timing of space. In *The Primacy of Perception* (1964[1964]), Merleau-Ponty describes the perception of the bottom of a pool. What would otherwise be an uninterrupted view of the pool floor seems to be “affected” by the water, shadows, and reflections.

Given that the pool floor is perceived as it is due to these apparent impediments, however, the notion of spatial interruption or interference is reconceived. This pool floor is not seen *despite* the water, shadows, and shimmering reflections, but *because* of them:

"When through the water's thickness I see the bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections there; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, then I would cease to see it as it is."<sup>1</sup>

What manifests is a pool floor that is not antecedent to being “interfered with” by space-as-water and space-as-reflections. Instead, the pool floor only becomes that which it is, the pool floor of the perceptual present, because of such watery, worldly spaces. Equally, space-as-water and space-as-reflections only become the spaces they are along with the pool floor. All spaces are co-constitutive.

The counter-argument will demand this is not the pool floor in-itself, but simply the perceiver's subsequent, water-and-reflection-affected, warped perspective of it. However, let us remember Wilson's photographically inspired, Merleau-Pontian mantra, that being bodied conditions the visual perspective. Given that the perceiver is bodied, is spatial, the principle of spatial co-constitution means that perceivers and perceiveds must also manifest co-constitutively, neither pre-existing in-itself. Merleau-Ponty illustrates the singularity of perceptual conditions by developing Edmund Husserl's phenomenological insight that when touching one's hand with their other hand, a subject simultaneously touches/perceives and is touched/perceived. The subject is part of the object-world that they touch at the same time as the object-world is part of the subject-world.<sup>2</sup> Subject and object experience each other inside, and as, each other. Or in

Merleau-Ponty's eloquent terms; "I do not see it [object] from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself."<sup>3</sup> We are duly encouraged to re-think the temporality in which perceived objects and perceiving subjects are separated by spatial subsequence.

Let us apply this reading to Wilson's *Homage to Turner*, where the sky is seemingly spatially "veiled" by trees, clouds, and shadows. If spaces are co-constitutive, rather than juxtaposed, then the sky is seen because of, instead of despite, such spaces. Object-spaces in the foreground do not interfere with what a spatial subject perceives of the spatial sky. Wilson induces this via blurry, indistinguishable representations of where space-as-trees ends and where space-as-cloudy-sky begins. If space is never straightforwardly in-itself, then trees, clouds, shadows, and even perceivers manifest concurrently. Wilson's photograph goes beyond simply representing a distant past-scene, to spatially incarnating the observer and the past. An imminent beyond—a past always arriving—emerges; an homage to the self-perceiving, where I meet my perceiving self.



Anne Scott Wilson, *Homage to Turner*, Digital pinhole image, 2013.

Another counter-argument advocating in-itself space will be that had Wilson taken this photograph a day earlier she might have seen this sky more clearly, but it now has *since* been impeded by clouds. Or perhaps that months prior there would have been a perspective of the sky unhindered by growing trees. Equally with Merleau-Ponty's pool, before it was filled with water, one might assume a more direct perspective of its bottom was possible, with which water and reflective sunlight has since interfered.

The assumption these arguments rely on though is that time is uni-directionally forward-moving, where the past is permanently frozen, becoming increasingly, anteriorly distanced from ever-new presents. Wilson's photography, when integrated with the philosophy of George Herbert Mead, helps us to interrogate this conception.

#### Timing of time(s)

When viewing *bruny #1* we imagine Wilson entering a pre-existing spatial scene. The road, trees, and sky are already there. Wilson subsequently captures a moment, represented from a particular spatial perspective. This present then becomes frozen as, and in, the past to the perceiver of the consequent photograph. This past appears to be unalterable, an in-itself memento.

This assumption is reconfigured by Mead in *The Philosophy of the Present (2002[1932])*. Mead recognises that the past “irrevocably conditions the present,”<sup>4</sup> consistent with our typical interpretation that time moves from past to present. Counter-intuitively though, Mead also characterises the past as revocable.<sup>5</sup> This is attributable to the novelty of a new present. As the present emerges, the past that conditions it must also be somewhat present. This renders the past “different,”<sup>6</sup> because this past-present relation is a development that the past did not already constitute. The past’s participation in constituting a novel/new present re-produces the past as that which will have become this present’s past. Or as Mead describes, the “what it was” of the past “changes.”<sup>7</sup> Given that the past only becomes past in relation to a present, it is not that this past was simply once a present, and is now a past. Rather, the past is as novel/new as the present, because the past only becomes the past generally, and “this past” specifically, concurrently with its relational present.

I anticipate the counter-argument that all that changes is our impression of the past, whilst the “past in-itself” remains separate. However, a past “in-itself” is not a “past,” nor a state of time. It can only be past via its relation with the present, concurrently becoming “what it was” and “what it is.” Time, in any state, has a perpetually re-produced origin.

#### Originary Past, Originary Photography

A photograph is not restricted to traversing a gap between present and past, given that the represented past conditions, and is conditioned by, the perceptual present. The sky represented in *Homage to Turner* does not indicate space as it inalterably, previously was, before photographic discovery. Rather, an originary past-sky emerges, a past which has never previously been present given that it now only emerges co-constitutively with the present.

What photography captures is not incarnation distantly perceived, but incarnation as perception. The body conditions the human experience of this incarnation. After all, from an embodied perspective in *bruny #1*, what we see, what we manifest, is *this* sky, are *these* trees. As body, trees, and sky co-incarnate, time and past emerge. *Fly Rhythm* is an insight into these perpetually originary rhythms of space(s) and/as time(s).

#### Notes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 182.
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.
3. *Ibid.*, 113.
4. George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 36.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 37.

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Will Johncock is a sessional academic from the University of New South Wales, Australia. His PhD explored phenomenological and structuralist conceptions of time, and current research considers how spatial entities, such as human bodies and social bodies, produce time.

