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Blind Time (Drawing with Anscombe)

This essay is part of a larger project on the emergence of action as a topic in philosophy (it would be called the theory of action), as a problem in literary theory (the relation between meaning and intention) and as an opportunity in art (beginning with what got called Action Painting). Part of the argument is that, with respect to literary theory, two different and conflicting accounts of what an action is played a role in structuring now longstanding debates about whether the intended meaning of a work is the only object of interpretation, a possible but not necessarily desirable object of interpretation or utterly irrelevant to the meaning of the work. Another part of the argument—the one that’s relevant to this essay—is that these two conflicting accounts of action played a similarly significant role in producing disagreements about whether artists themselves ought to repudiate the idea of intentional meaning and especially of the ambition to make the work formally autonomous that has often been thought to accompany that idea. It has, however been hard to see how these conflicts about intention and form are linked to the conflicts about action since until fairly recently the two competing views of action I’m interested in were—under the name the Davidson/Anscombe thesis—conflated. Today, however, it’s pretty clear that the differences between Elizabeth Anscombe in her (1957) book *Intention* and Donald Davidson in essays like his (1971) “Agency” are significant.¹ And it’s because the Davidson/Anscombe thesis has now come to look more like the Davidson/Anscombe debate that although the title of the Robert Morris piece I’ll be discussing is *Blind Time (Drawing with Davidson)* the title of my paper about that piece is “Blind Time (Drawing with Anscombe).”

For my purposes, Morris is a doubly useful figure. He’s useful first because he had a remarkably sophisticated interest in the theory of action so even though (as we’ll see) critics may disagree about where he stood in relation to Davidson, we can pretty much agree that figuring out where he stood is important to understanding his work. Second, long before he started caring about Davidson, he had (under the influence of Pollock and then breaking from that influence) become committed to the idea that an art that made visible the “process” by which it had been made (the artist’s actions) could make possible “the work’s refusal to continue estheticizing the form” (46) and would thus produce a break with the values of unity, intentionality, and autonomy he and many others identified with modernism. In other words, the departure from the aesthetic (the refusal to continue estheticizing the form) that makes possible this collection’s interest in the return to the aesthetic was

¹ For an exemplary analysis of the differences between Davidson and Anscombe, see Hornsby (2011).

not simply a function of newfound critical interests in politics or identity or theory or whatever; it took place first in art itself. And if, as I will argue below, there are theoretical problems with the idea of action to which that refusal of the aesthetic appealed, we should still recognize that the desire for such a refusal produced interestingly ambitious (albeit politically catastrophic²) art.

Morris made the *Blind Time* drawings with his eyes shut (see Figure 1) and then added quotations from Davidson and hand-written texts which, as the philosopher Jean Michel Roy puts it, “communicate his intentions,” “defined,” Roy says, “in terms of gestures” (137), as in: “Working blindfolded... the hands begin at the bottom, just to the right of estimated center... and then outward to the right margin...” etc. (Morris, *Blind Time Drawing*). What Roy and others have seen in these works is what he calls not just a new kind of drawing but a critique of the “traditional conception” of drawing. Traditionally, he says, we might think that “drawing is a *direct* product of an intention” (136). We would, for example, describe ourselves as “drawing a horse” or “drawing a diagonal line” and we would think of the horse or the line as the product of our intentions. But the *Blind Time* drawings and the accompanying commentary show that that would be a mistake. The artist’s intentions are not to draw a horse but to move his hands on the paper in various ways (“upward” and then “outward”); the drawings are what happens when he does that. Thus, Roy says, they should be understood as “the by-products of the artist’s intentions and not its products” (137). And this is particularly striking in the *Drawing with Davidson* series since Roy thinks of Davidson as a defender of the traditional conception, and thus thinks also that in the *Blind Time* drawings with Davidson, the juxtaposition of Morris’s statements of intention with quotations from Davidson is meant to highlight the difference between Morris and Davidson, to call attention, he says, to the “inadequacy” of our “ordinary conception” of “action considered as intentional behavior” (137).

The passage from Davidson that accompanies the drawing we’ve already been looking at suggests, however, that this reading can’t be completely right. It says: “We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body—these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies; the rest is up to nature” (59). This is almost the exact opposite of what Roy calls “direct action.” On this account, to use an example that has (weirdly) become canonical, what the “traditional conception” of action would describe as a person crushing a snail with her foot would better be described as a person moving her foot in such a way as to cause a snail to be crushed. The “direct” action would be the moving of the foot. And if the person were drawing rather than crushing the snail, the correct description would be not “I’m drawing a snail” but “I’m moving my hand in such a way as to cause a drawing of a snail. The action is the movement of one’s hands. (The drawing is the effect of that cause.)

² For my account of the politics of the refusal of autonomy (and the politics of the return to it) see, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*.

Roy thinks that Morris's view is different from this because he thinks that in Morris, the drawing is more a by-product than a product. That is, it's as much an unintended as an intended effect. But in Davidson and Morris both, the basic idea is that you can't really be said to have intended to produce a drawing—what you intended to do is move your hand in a way that you anticipated or hoped would produce a drawing. For both, in other words, your intentional action is a movement of your body describable independently of whatever effect—products or by-products—that movement might produce. Thus the point of drawing blind is to insist on the distance between your action (the movement of your body) and what happens (the drawing) in such a way as to dramatize the gap that turns anticipation into hope but that is already there even in anticipation and always there even when your eyes are open. Why? Because on this account, what you intended to do (move your body) is structurally separate from what you hoped would happen (your drawing). Thus, insofar as *Blind Time Drawing* thematizes the gap between what you do (moving your hands) and what happens (nature does the rest), rather than rejecting Davidson's theory of action, it brings out some of its essential features.

And also some of its essential problems. For although Davidson may have understood himself as following Anscombe, she described the idea "that what one knows as intentional action is only the intention, or possibly also the bodily movement: and that the rest is known by observation to be the *result*, which was only willed in the intention" as "a mad account..." (51-52). It's mad, she thinks, for several reasons but the relevant one for us is the idea that what she calls "the rest"—the squashed snail, the drawing—can be understood as the "result" of the action. What Anscombe wants to say is that drawing is not a result of the action but is internal to the description of the action and, strikingly enough, she makes this point by appealing (like Morris) to the idea of doing something with your eyes shut. Imagine yourself, eyes shut, writing "I am a fool" (82) on a piece of paper or a blackboard. There are lots of ways this can go wrong and what you write won't turn out to be legible—in other words, you won't get the result you want. Nonetheless, the description we would give of what we're doing, she thinks, is not holding the chalk or pen between, say, our thumb and forefinger, and moving our hand first up and then to the right (to make the f); it's not moving our fingers in such a way that we "calculate and hope" the word "fool" will get written (when nature takes her course)—it's writing "I am a fool." And this is true even if you've run out of ink and the word fool never appears. On the one hand, you haven't succeeded in producing a legible inscription of the word fool; on the other hand, it's not as if what you really should have said was "this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed" (82). The fact that the word "fool" never appeared means your act was in some respects a failure; it doesn't mean that you were really just moving your hand, that you weren't writing "I'm a fool."

In terms of the theory of action, Anscombe's point is that we should not think of what we're doing as moving our hands in such a way as to cause there to be a drawing or a word—we should think of ourselves as drawing

or writing. So insofar as it's right to say that the *Blind Time Drawings* should be understood as the "consequences" of the artist's intentional actions—his "gestures"—they are, as I've suggested, consistent with a Davidsonian account of action but not with Anscombe.³

But, going back to one of Morris's earliest and most important essays—"Anti Form"—we can also see something different, something in which an Anscombian understanding of the purpose of the act not as its effect or result but as internal to its description (we're drawing, not moving our hand to produce a drawing) makes its appearance. And, despite the fact that the essay is called "Anti Form," this appearance will have to do precisely with the relation between the form of an act and the form of a work of art.

The hero of "Anti Form" is Jackson Pollock, since Pollock's actions are sometimes so vividly readable in the works themselves that, as Michael Schreyach has written, "viewers commonly experience" his pictures "by reconstructing imaginatively his kinesthetic movements above the canvas surface during the process of painting" (51). Indeed, in the wake of Hans Namuth's famous photos of Pollock at work, there's a whole tradition of understanding these paintings as records of his actions in producing them. What matters here is the movement of the body that produced the paintings and the fact that they bear the visible marks of those movements. They aren't just the effects of the action that caused them (any painting is the effect of the action that caused it); they *look like* the effects of the action that caused them. Thus, the essay's called "Anti Form" because what matters is not the form of the painting but the degree to which the painting makes visible the performance that produced it. This is in part what Morris means when he says that "Pollock was able to recover process and hold on to it as part of the end form of his work" (43).

But even in that sentence—precisely *because* the essay is called "Anti Form"—we can see a certain tension: the tension between the idea of preserving the process rather than producing a form (hence "Anti Form") and the idea of holding onto process and making it part of form—the "end form" of the work. And this is a version of the tension we have already seen between a Davidsonian understanding of the act as the intentional movement of one's body that results in a drawing and an Anscombian understanding of the act as including rather than producing the drawing.

The point in Anscombe is not to deny that the artist produces the drawing but to insist that the effect is already intrinsic to the cause. "The term intentional," she says, "has reference to a *form* of description of events" (84), and since that form is distinguished by its inclusion of purpose (that's part

³ See, for example, Davidson's description of braking a car as "pressing a pedal" and thus causing the "automobile to come to a stop"; his point is that we can assign "responsibility" to the man braking not by "transfer[ring] agency from one event to another" (the movement of the foot would be one event, the car stopping another) or "by saddling the agent with a new action" (first he pressed the pedal, then he stopped the car) but "by pointing out that his original action had those results" (59). Following Anscombe, by contrast, we would say that the action the man performed was not pressing a pedal (with the consequence that the car braked) but braking.

of the description of an act), the gap between what we do (move our bodies) and what nature does is (in the description) always already crossed. What it means to preserve the process is not just to record the movement of our bodies (not just to imagine the painting as the result of those movements) but to record their purpose, thus both to record and transcend them. This is, I think, what Morris himself is getting at when he praises Pollock not only for preserving the “traces of touch” but for holding on to those traces—“the process”—in a way that makes it “part of the end form of the work.”

On the one hand, those traces are in a certain sense held onto as long as the marks on the paper look like the movements of the hand that produced them, as long as, in effect, they look like what caused them. On the other hand, those traces are transcended when, for example, we write “I am a fool” since the meaning of that sentence would be identical if we wrote it with a typewriter instead of a pen but the movement of our hands would obviously not be. In the first case, we’ve held onto the process, but we haven’t managed to make it part of the form—indeed, the work has the shape of our hand movements but no form of its own. In the second case, the work has a form (the form of the words that it consists of) but we’ve lost the process—it doesn’t matter how we made the words.

But what Morris is calling for is a work that preserves the process *and* makes it part of the form. It’s this form that disappears in Davidson’s idea that all we ever do is move our bodies; nature does the rest. It’s this form that the work of art can only preserve by turning the drawing into a work that doesn’t just record the physical process that produced it (which, after all, any drawing does) and doesn’t even just look like the process that produced it (which the *Blind Time* drawings do) but which turns the form of the act (not moving your fingers and your hand but drawing) into the end form of the work.

Look at these two recent works by the photographer Phil Chang. (Figures 2 and 3). They’re made eyes open, using a brush dipped in replacement Ink for Epson printers and dragged diagonally from the top left down to the bottom right on Epson paper. Why do they have a relation to photography? Because, even though no camera is used, they produce a crucial feature of the photograph—the ink on the paper is both caused by and looks like elements of the process that produced it, in the same way that a handprint is both caused by and looks like a hand and that a photo of a handprint is both caused by and looks like the handprint. Indeed, in a certain sense, they’re more indexical than, say, photographs made with a camera and then produced as inkjet prints since the mediation of the printing is foregone. They’re direct records of the process that produced them. And in this respect, of course, they’re also like the *Blind Time* drawings.

But, if we compare the two pictures, we can see also that the trace of the artist’s movement is itself positioned in a space that’s not determined by that movement. Anscombe, imagining things that could go wrong writing with your eyes shut, mentions going over the edge of the paper. If we were to read these two drawings from the Davidsonian perspective—all we ever do is move our bodies; nature does the rest—we could say of Figure 2 that it fully

records the artist's action (the movement of his hand) while Figure 3 doesn't, and this sense of failure in Figure 3 is precisely the incompleteness that—in relation to the purpose that, understood as a desired result, must be located outside it—is intrinsic to any act. The fact that we can't see the whole brushstroke would thus be what Morris elsewhere called the work's refusal of the totality of vision.

In Anscombe, however, the illegibility of the words written outside the paper, or the invisibility of the brushstroke that goes beyond it, are understood differently. Her point is that the intentional structure of the failed act is the same as the intentional structure of the successful one. We might then juxtapose these two images—one in which the brush stays within the frame, the other in which it appears to go beyond it—and say that both function as traces precisely of that intentional structure. From this standpoint, the idea would be that the invisibility of the full brush stroke doesn't compromise the internal structure of the act; indeed, it foregrounds it. What it shows is that the totality Morris refuses is already built into the very concept of the act, whether or not the act succeeds. On this account, Chang understands action better than Morris; that's what *Blind Time drawing not with Davidson but with Anscombe* looks like.

But this ability to reproduce both the physical movement of the act and its form, even if it improves on Morris, doesn't really meet the challenge posed by Morris, which is not just to record the process by which the work is made but to make that process "part of the end form of the work." And we can see both what this challenge means and how it can begin to be addressed by noting the way in which Chang, turning the edges of the piece of paper you might write or draw on into the frame of his drawing, has both preserved *and* reconfigured the mark he's made. In Figure 3, as we've noted, we can't quite see the trace of the whole action—it's cut off by the frame. So there's a difference between the brush strokes we can feel would have been made by the movement of the hand and the brush strokes we can see, and it's in our experience of this difference that we can begin to see a difference not only between the record of the act and the work but between what we might call the form of the act and the form of the work.

We experience the brush stroke on the top differently from the one on the bottom because the one on top is framed in a way that allows us to see it all while the other cuts it off; the one on top allows us to see the complete movement while the one on the bottom doesn't. So, the one on top is in a certain sense complete but its completeness is in the complete visibility of the motion that produced it. On the bottom, however, the record of the physical motion is incomplete; its totality, as I suggested above, is the totality of the purposiveness that distinguishes action itself. But, in the picture (as opposed to in Anscombe's example), the totality is marked not by the way it survives the brush going beyond the paper but by the frame that interrupts it. In other words, the completeness of the picture is not as a record of the completeness (the teleological orientation) that structures any action; it's as the restructuring of that action—a completeness of the picture *made out of* the

visible incompleteness of the physical movement, a completeness of the picture *instead of* the action. What we see here is not just the record of the physical movement of the hand, and not even just the record of the intentional structure of the act being performed with the hand but the subsumption of that act into the work.

What it means to see an event as an act, Anscombe wrote, is to see it as intentional (“the term ‘intentional’ has reference to a *form* of description of events” [84]). In literary theory, this view has been rare. We can find it in “Against Theory’s” idea that to see marks in the sand as words is already to see them in terms of the act of writing. And we can see it defended by Stanley Cavell against Monroe Beardsley’s claim that if we found out that “an abstract expressionist painting” we were “enjoying” “turned out to have been painted by a child or a chimpanzee or a machine,” the “discovery that it was naively done” would not “invalidate” our “response” (104). From the standpoint of the theory of interpretation, this is obviously a non-starter. If, for example, what you were enjoying was the way the painting made the process part of the end form of the work and you were debating with a friend who was enjoying the way it refused the notion of form altogether, your debate would instantly vanish and your enjoyment would at the very least be transformed when you discovered that what you were looking at had been made by someone who didn’t have the concept of form. The debate would come to an end because your account of what the painting meant would now be reduced to a report on what it made you think of and the enjoyment would be transformed because whatever pleasure you took in the painting would now be of the same kind you might take in a sunset or the look of a beach when the waves wash up against it. Cavell says, “discovering an intention is a way of discovering an explanation” (235); by the same token, discovering the irrelevance of intention is a way of discovering the relevance of a different kind of explanation: say, how the waves on the beach produce irregular indentations in the sand.

Of course, Beardsley (along with his collaborator, William K. Wimsatt) did not think that poems or even paintings were characteristically produced unintentionally. (“A poem comes out of a head not out of a hat” [4], as they put it.) Rather, they thought of the artist’s intention as relevant to the production of the work but not to its meaning. What they called the “designing intellect,” they say in “The Intentional Fallacy,” is the “cause” of a work.⁴ The poet only moves her fingers; the rest is up to the syntactic and semantic rules of the language. Or, equally (and only apparently oppositely), up to the different contextual positions of the people reading it. Either way, the ongoing anti-intentionalism of literary theory depends upon this commitment to what Cavell, following Anscombe, called a “bad picture of intention” (227).

⁴ For an ingenious account of “The Intentional Fallacy” as a good argument against the relevance of intention conceived as cause, see Jennifer Ashton (2011). Of course, the problem is that, having no other way to conceive it, Wimsatt and Beardsley thought they were making an argument against the relevance of intention *tout court* rather than an argument against the causal account of it.

And, with respect to literary theory, because it misunderstands what action is, it misunderstands what interpreting is and, in fact, makes the very idea of understanding (or misunderstanding) a work of art incoherent.

With respect to the history of art, however, it's action more than understanding that interests us, and here too, as we've already seen, the idea that the intentional act causes the work has played a central role. But even theorists who are alert to the difficulties produced by the invocation of the causal⁵ can be so attached to some version of the bad picture of intention that they think of escape from intentionality as necessary. In the final chapter of his *Force* (2013), for example, Christoph Menke cites Nietzsche's claim that because "there is no logical connection between the subject's 'inner' states and his 'exterior' action," "everything is causal" and "there is no intentionality" (88). This is the view of intention as "a purely interior thing" (9) that Anscombe begins by criticizing, and Menke too, albeit still following Nietzsche, wants to go beyond it. He does so, however, not by rethinking the interiority of intention but by suggesting that the aesthetic offers "a peculiar way of doing" that can't be reduced either to the intentional or the causal, a way of "doing" in which "the subject gives free exercise to his forces unfettered by all purpose" (89). As an example of which he offers us Nietzsche's "blind sea-crab, continually groping in all directions and *occasionally* catching something; yet it does not grope in order to catch but because its limbs need the exercise." But (setting aside the issues of species specificity), this example reproduces the opposition it is meant to deconstruct. Why isn't moving your limbs because you need exercise just as intentional as moving them to catch something? Or, if we want to insist that the crab needs exercise but isn't moving his limbs to get it, why haven't we just returned to the purely causal? The flower "needs" water but absorbing it through its roots isn't a "peculiar way of doing."

And the same thing happens when we turn to the human and to what Menke regards as "an essential feature of the successful performance of actions": the "ability to innovate, to invent," to establish "experimental conditions" which "expose" us "to events that then take their own course" (90). Why is innovation particularly relevant? Because the innovator can only produce something new, something that "has not existed before," by "exposing" herself "to a change," maintaining "an openness toward the accidental" (90). Thus, inasmuch as the "concept of accident marks the moment at which the doing breaks loose from action," when the accident happens, the subject does something more or other than she intended and the "doing" thus "transcends its purpose" (90). But, here again, it's hard to see how accident poses a problem for anything other than the most idealized concept of intentional action (that is, the one that Menke seeks to repudiate and to which he remains entirely attached). All actions are open to accident; indeed, it's only because

⁵ The project of Menke's *Force* is precisely to go "beyond the Cartesian alternatives of self-conscious action and causal mechanism" (11); a short version of the critique of that project would be that it remains so attached to its model of self-conscious action that it thinks to escape it must be to escape intentionality itself.

you can fail to do what you meant to do that you can succeed in doing what you meant to do. So even an agent who isn't the slightest bit open to the accidental (she wants everything to be completely in her control) is nonetheless exposed to it. You could not legibly write "I am a fool" unless you might turn out to have written it illegibly.

And, to turn things around, the acts of an agent who is open to accident are just as intentional as the acts of one who isn't. If, for example, the model of the experiment is to be taken literally, the idea that you don't know and can't control what will happen is intrinsic (rather than inimical) to the purpose of the action. If I dip my toe in the water to find out whether it's warm or cold, it is indeed nature that does the rest (i.e. gives me my answer) but what I've done is not somehow made less purposeful by the fact that I didn't know how it would turn out—indeed the purpose of the act was precisely to find out how it would turn out.

By the same token, if I draw with my eyes shut, the picture I end up with will be exactly as readable in terms of my act (which is to say *only* readable in terms of my act) as the one I make with my eyes wide open. Just imagine the difference between a Blind Time Drawing with Davidson and an otherwise identical open-eyed drawing with Anscombe. Kenneth Surin enthusiastically describes the blind drawings as an effort to "destroy the very possibility of the unity" (165) that he thinks is a hallmark of modernism and argues that this destruction is enabled by a Davidsonian "image of thought that, when it comes to thinking of the mainsprings of human action, has no place for anything except bodies and bodily movements" (152). He would never say the same thing about the same set of marks produced by a Robert Morris who had just bought a new pair of glasses and was trying to see if the prescription was right. The act of drawing with your eyes shut is not somehow less intentional than the act of drawing with your eyes open—they're just two different acts. Which is why Surin is mistaken to think that the "mainspring of human action" can have no place "for anything except bodies and bodily movements"—not because bodily movements aren't crucial but because they aren't even identifiable except in terms of their purpose.

But it's one thing to say that Surin is mistaken about the unity of action and something very different to say that he's mistaken about unity in art. In other words, on my reading, he can't help but be wrong about what Morris has in fact done since any understanding of Morris's actions must be an account of bodily movements whose form is already intentional. But even if the action has a necessary unity, the work does not. And what Chang helps us see is the way in which—to establish that unity—the representation of action has needed to break with the action it represents. Or, better, to break with the action that produced it, and thereby establish the possibility of representing rather than recording that action.

Again, my point is not that Chang or any other artist is likely to have been driven to his practice by thinking about what the best theory of action is. Actually, Morris would be almost alone among artists in thinking seriously about this question. And, among philosophers, Menke stands out

for his commitment to the idea that aesthetic making provides a way into thinking about action as such. So even if, in my view, he's wrong to think that the possibility of the accidental functions as a critique of the intentional (it would be better to say just the opposite—we wouldn't even have the concept of action if we didn't have the concept of accident, and we couldn't have acts that succeeded unless we also had acts that failed), his tribute to openness usefully reinvigorates Morris's enthusiasm for an art in which "chance is accepted" (46). From the standpoint of the theory of action, there may be no interesting difference between drawing with your eyes shut and your eyes open but from the standpoint of the history of art, there is. And it's from the standpoint of the history of art that we can see in Chang's photographic brush strokes the refusal of Morris's account of what action meant to art and, in that refusal, his tribute to it.

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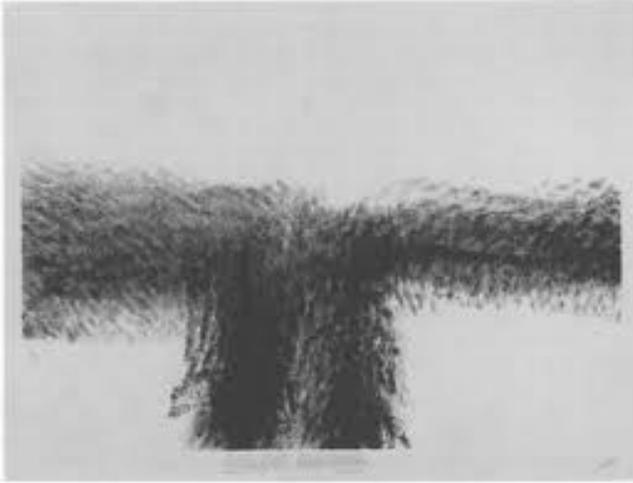


Figure 1 - from Robert Morris, *Writing with Davidson, Some Afterthoughts*.



Figure 2: Replacement Ink for Epson Printers (Black 446004)
on Epson Premium Glossy Paper, 60 x 42 inches, 2014



Figure 3: Replacement Ink for Epson Printers (Matte Black on 25% Grey 222603) on Epson Enhanced Matte Paper,, 29-1/2 x 24-1/2 inches, 2017