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‘Taking a line for a walk’: On improvisatory drawing

Keywords

improvisation
wayfaring
chance
decision-making
plant growth
rhythm
innovation

Abstract

In this article we reflect on a line traced by Julia. Julia is an undergraduate student in a class that includes a project entitled ‘Lives of Lines’. As part of the activities of this project, the students were asked to draw continuously for a minute with a white marker on a black page, without lifting the marker, and without trying to represent anything in particular. We analyse Julia’s tracing of the line as a kind of improvisation – the same type of improvising that occurs in conversations, music playing, hiking, dancing and countless other activities. We characterize the improviser as a daydreamer immersed in a reverie: an open field of reciprocating forces, desires, surprises and recollections playing themselves out as some of them encounter their way forward free to proceed, and others do not. The improviser becomes an arena in which body, hand, pen, paper, chair, other bodies, traces, words and sounds mutually displace and attract on their own.

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Talking with other improvisors [...] one curious uniformity of attitude, or at least explanation, was the use of Paul Klee's 'Taking a line for a walk'. Evan Parker, Christine Jeffrey and Phil Wachsmann have all quoted it at different times in talking about what they do.

(Bailey 1992: 108)

Introduction

'What is a line?' is Ingold's timeless question (2016: 41). After outlining a preliminary taxonomy of lines, he distinguishes between 'active lines', traced in the air by a gesturing hand or on paper along the tip of a moving pencil, arising

from the movement of a point that [...] is free to go wherever it will, for movement's sake [...] [and] another kind of line, however, [that] is in a hurry. It wants to get from one location to another, and then to another, but has little time to do so.

(2016: 75)

The latter ones are 'connecting lines' which look like broken segments, each one joining a point and the next one. Active lines are traced by wayfaring, which involves creating a path where there is none, along the travelling itself, as Machado has celebrated in his poetry:

As you walk, you make your own road,
and when you look back
you see the path
you will never travel again.
Traveler, there is no road;
only a ship's wake on the sea.

(Machado and Berg 2003: 55)

By wayfaring, the traveller goes on in ways that are minutely responsive and attentive to the changing surroundings and to her life history. In this article we reflect on an active line traced by Julia. Julia is an undergraduate student in childhood studies. She was enrolled in a unit called 'Learning with Materials'. The unit included a four-week project entitled 'Lives of Lines'. As part of the activities of this project, the students were asked to draw continuously for a minute with a white marker on a black page, without lifting the marker and without trying to represent anything in particular. The idea was wayfaring on the black page for a minute. We strive to advance the thesis that wayfaring is akin to improvising – improvising as it occurs in conversations, music playing, hiking, drawing

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and countless other activities. Like wayfaring, improvising is a temporal practice open to the unanticipated and to the ongoing engagement with others, materials and instruments. A helpful way of characterizing improvisation is by distinguishing between improvisation and composition:

In 1968 I run into Steve Lacy on the street in Rome. I took out my pocket tape recorder and asked him to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation. He answered: 'In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds.'

His answer lasted exactly fifteen seconds and is still the best formulation of the question I know.
(Bailey 1992: 141)

According to this formulation, the distinction between composition and improvisation lies in differences on how time flows. In composition time splits along double layers, one for snippets of performance and another for somewhat wholistic and deliberative revisions. In improvisation there is only one temporal flow meshing performers, performance and audience. This is the temporal flow that we are going to try to grasp through Julia's line. The article is divided into four sections: (1) Meandering and looping, (2) Primary growth, (3) Rhythm and symmetry and (4) Innovation. Each brings a different set of observations around the theme of improvisation, in the context of Julia's drawing, with the discussion tracing some continuity through them.

1. Meandering and looping

In this section we follow some of Julia's lines that she drew while the idea of the doodle activity was being introduced by the instructor. Julia's line pursued two distinctive patterns that became pervasive during her subsequent one-minute doodling: meandering lines and loops. The first meandering line and loop are shown in Figure 1.

The line starts from an edge of the paper in a region which was mostly empty (i.e. lower half on the right side). It is as if an empty region of the paper calls for a line to occupy it. The movement of the tip of the pen leaves behind a trace, like footprints, as it were. The meandering line leans upwards towards encountering other lines already drawn. The tracing of the first loop, which appears to begin around the region in which the pen crosses a pre-existing line, followed a pattern that would be common to all subsequent loops: their launching is marked by a precipitous acceleration reaching a level of high speed and a quick slow down during the crossing of the loop itself, whose completion is marked by a rather slow transition towards a second meandering line. Such outline for the development of a loop is shown in Figure 2.

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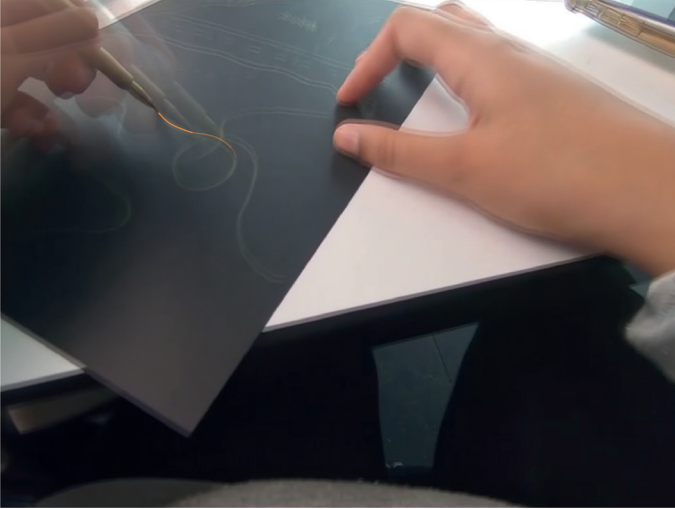


Figure 1a: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, First Pair Meandering/Loop Line, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

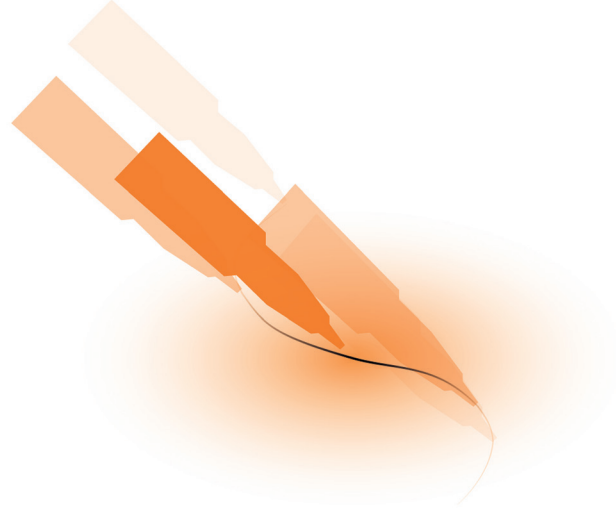


Figure 1b: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Region of Growth, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

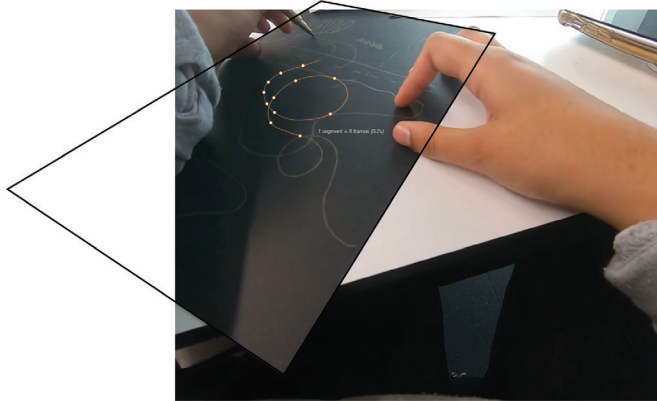


Figure 2a: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Marking a Loop Every Five Frames: After Entering the Loop, the Speed Increases for Most of It, Slowing Down Sharply around the Self-Crossing, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

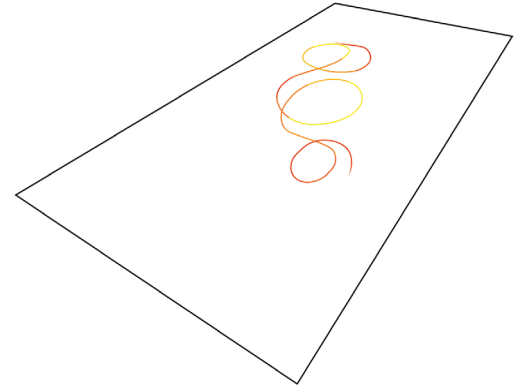


Figure 2b: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Speed Indicated by Colour, Yellower is Faster and Redder is Slower, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

The word ‘event’, in this article, refers to a transition from one shape/velocity pattern into another, such as the transition from the ending of the meandering line and the beginning of the loop in Figure 1. These events occur over an imprecise interval of time during which a newly shaped trace is ‘launched’. Around the tip of the pen there is an active tracing region – a vanishing halo around it – which leaves, after itself, a continuous line that, while preserving its own trace as originally charted, may influence the turning out of subsequent lines. In Figure 1 we indicate the active part around the tip of the pen – the region of growth – with orange colour. The region of growth is where events and the unfolding of their subsequent developments keep going on. A region of growth is akin to the ‘specious present’ or ‘duration’ encompassing the present of lived time, which spans the immediate past and future in fluctuant ways that cannot be ascertained by the measurement of time intervals.

A meandering line advances through lateral deviations – left, right, left, etc. – of different amplitudes and durations. A loop is more or less circular, crossing itself around its initiation, and being traced, relative to a meandering line, at high speed. What are the origins of this differentiation? When or how does a region of growth turn from one onto the other? There are two traditional and opposed answers to this question: (1) intelligent design: the differentiation from meandering line to loop is a result of Julia’s design decision upon facing, at certain moment, two alternatives, namely, continuing meandering or turning to looping, and (2) chance: independently from the ongoing drawing of the line, aleatory and unconscious sources provoke transitions from one pattern to another. A critique of the first answer, intelligent design, has eloquently been advanced by Bergson in *Time and Free Will*:

[it pictures] a self which, after having traversed a series M O of conscious states, when it reaches the point O finds before it two directions O X and O Y, equally open. These directions thus become things, real paths into which the highroad of consciousness leads, and it depends only on the self which of them is entered upon. In short, the continuous and living activity of this self, in which we have distinguished, by abstraction only, two opposite directions, is replaced by these directions themselves, transformed into indifferent inert things awaiting our choice.

(Bergson [1913] 2001: 2221–26)

Bergson questioned the idea that there is a time in which, say, a draftsperson drawing continuously confronts two constituted alternatives, in analogy to a walker facing a bifurcation of the road demanding side-taking, implying that alternative options have been already pre-defined before the line undertakes one of them because, otherwise, what would the design decision have been about? While a ‘retrospective’ examination of the traces might be suitably translated into a sequence of design decisions, such presumed bifurcations into ‘indifferent things awaiting our choice’ is a distorting and groundless artifice. The meandering line could have turned loop anywhere or nowhere,

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which is what confers freedom to Julia and life to her line. Furthermore, in Figure 1 we cannot make a clear-cut identification of a point in which the meandering line ends, and Loop 1 begins. Rather, we can roughly circumscribe a region over which the line was both, meandering and looping and turning more to one and less to the other. Among many others, meandering or looping were always available possibilities and if courses of action were a result of design decisions, then there would have been countless decisions taken by Julia: every step along the way. Chance, on the other hand, is a non-answer allusion to a hidden mechanism that determines courses of action arbitrarily. Intelligent design and chance are polarities closely related to the perennial discussions on free will (Dennett 2017). In the context of drawing, intelligent design frames free will as centred on the ‘design’ of the line ‘prior’ to its drawing. Chance randomizes free will turning the life of the line into inert responsiveness to uncontrolled aleatory forces. This article explores a ground between these two points of view, in which drawing is subject to forces, but also engages with them, as in a sailing boat navigating the forces of the sea and the wind. This perspective that is neither intelligent design nor chance, goes to the core of what we take improvisation to be. To illustrate this third answer, we include the following reflection by William James encapsulating, he writes, ‘an entire psychology of volition’:

We know what it is to get out of bed on a freezing morning in a room without a fire, and how the very vital principle within us protests against the ordeal. Probably most persons have lain on certain mornings for an hour at a time unable to brace themselves to the resolve. We think how late we shall be, how the duties of the day will suffer; we say, ‘I must get up, this is ignominious’, etc.; but still the warm couch feels too delicious, the cold outside too cruel, and resolution faints away and postpones itself again and again just as it seemed on the verge of bursting the resistance and passing over into the decisive act. Now how do we ever get up under such circumstances? If I may generalize from my own experience, we more often than not get up without any struggle or decision at all. We suddenly find that we have got up. A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs; we forget both the warmth and the cold; we fall into some reverie connected with the day’s life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, ‘Hollo! I must lie here no longer’ – an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects. It was our acute consciousness of both the warmth and the cold during the period of struggle, which paralyzed our activity then and kept our idea of rising in the condition of wish and not of will. The moment these inhibitory ideas ceased, the original idea exerted its effects. This case seems to me to contain in miniature form the data for an entire psychology of volition. [...] The popular notion that mere consciousness as such is not essentially a forerunner of activity, that the latter must result from some superadded ‘will-force’, is a very natural

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inference from those special cases in which we think of an act for an indefinite length of time without the action taking place. These cases, however, are not the norm.

(James [1890] 1983: 506–07)

The shifting of inhibitory ideas and their displacement by other ideas conducive to getting up ‘without any struggle or decision at all’, reflects an image of complex forces playing in consonance and dissonance, precluding and prompting courses of action with relative intensities. In this image, the past is a crucial source of dynamism and creation. From the past a stubborn resistance to getting out of bed emerges, which is a near past of other winters that shocked us by freezing mornings, as well as a distant past along the evolution of our species adapting our bodies to a comfortable range of temperatures. The past is an immense fountain of virtual memories, some of which contract into the present and transform it (Bergson 1990). An ongoing dynamic play of inhibitions, urges and releases, altogether launches events without the intervention of a superadded will-force, which is what making a decision ordinarily amounts to. Rather than a decision-maker, a drafts person drawing doodles is, for the most part, a daydreamer immersed in a reverie: an open field of reciprocating forces, desires, surprises and recollections playing themselves out as some of them encounter their way forward free to proceed, and others do not. The condition for this process to unfold is not for the drafts person to sequentially decide on bifurcated possibilities, but to become an arena in which body, hand, pen, paper, chair, other bodies, traces, words and sounds mutually displace and attract on their own. Rather than a decision maker, an improviser is someone opening herself to a self-sustaining coming and going of ideas and affects whose provenance always encompasses more-than herself: the past, the institution, the neighbours, the instruments and materials at hand, the available time, the temperature and light around, the ever-changing relevance of what happens, and so on. The events occurring in this arena are reducible neither to the decisions of an intelligent designer nor to independent randomness but emerge from an in-between-ness where we recognize life happening.

In order to examine complex forces playing in consonance and dissonance, precluding and prompting courses of action with relative intensities, we will discuss the subsequent loops and meandering lines shown in Figure 3.

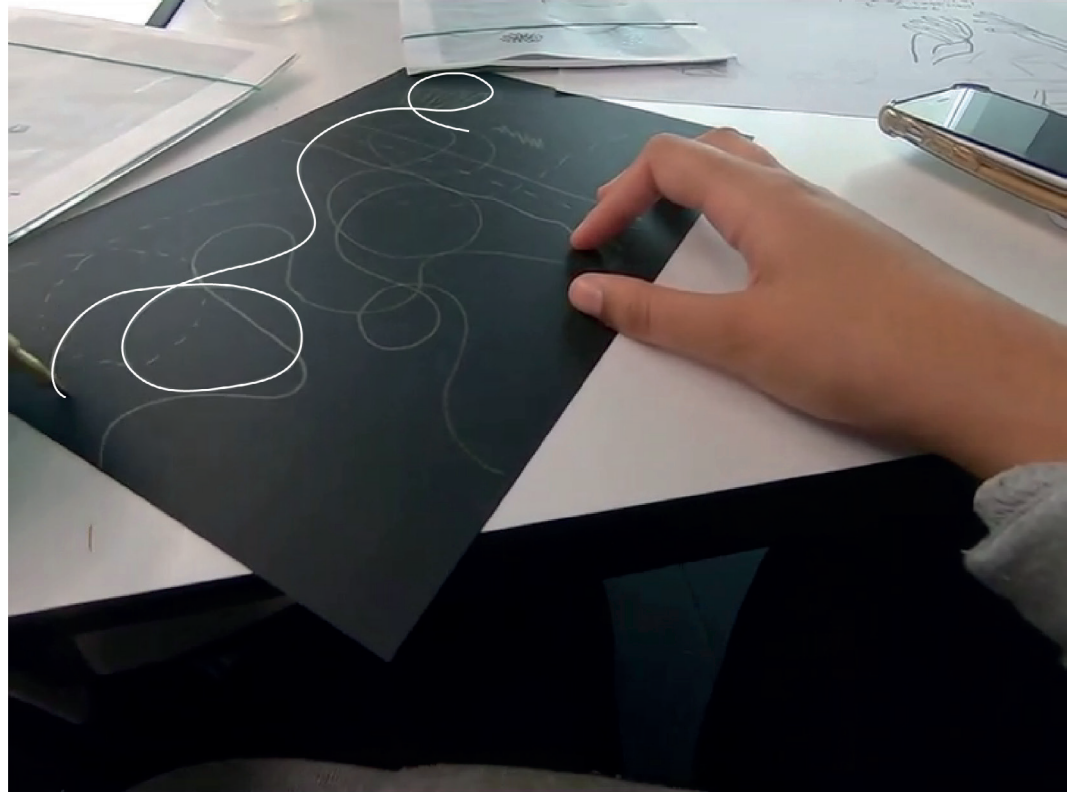
Meandering lines go relatively slowly, turning somewhat right and left, ‘looking for a place’ until ‘a place is found’ for a loop: then the hand accelerates into the space and moves itself with momentum through the loop. Meandering lines cross existing lines but seem to avoid the most recent ones. For instance, the long meandering line crosses several existing lines but none that has been traced after Loop 1 (shown in Figure 1). Looping is the preferred mode for the line to change directions. Loops tends to be expansive but constrained by tangential contacts, as if whenever possible the loop stretches out the most without crossing lines. Let us focus on Loop 4 and the prior and subsequent meanderings. The line travels horizontally leftwards, approaching a nearby edge of the page. This

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*Figure 3: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Two Pairs of Meandering/Loop Lines, 30 August 2021.
© Tam Dibley.*

approaching calls for an imperative change of direction to avoid transgressing borders. The downwards direction is enticing because of its open spaces. However, since changes of direction operate largely by means of a loop, the line begins to curve upwards precipitating its metamorphosis. Pressed by the sharpness of the corner, the loop is fast and rather small. Now facing downwards, the line slows down and turns left wise, which manages to evade lines recently drawn. Then it turns right wise, but not so much that it would lead to crossing recent traces. The line travels downward seeking a region that is empty of recent traces. As it finds such a region in the lowest range of the page, it begins to loop in order to occupy it. By aiming at a tangential contact, the loop tries to expand as much as possible without crossing past lines. However, the circularity of Loop 5, already set as part of its 'launching', makes the two subsequent crossings unavoidable. This account of Julia's drawing along Loops 3, 4 and 5 brings to mind how, as the pen continued its trace, its surroundings and local history, such as the proximity to the edges of the paper or the lines already drawn on paper, as well as the circumstances of the activity, such as being a student on this class or past readings of selected sections of Ingold's 'Lines', were all potentially participating in the coming-to-be of new and distinct loops.

2. Primary growth

In trying to grasp processes occurring in line's region of growth, we found it inspirational to study and reflect on the growth of plants:

Growth from the root and shoot tips resulting in increases in height and length is called primary growth. Growth that increases the thickness of stems and branches is called secondary growth. Primary growth occurs in small areas called apical meristems. All leaves, height growth and increases in the length of branches and roots are the result of growth at the apical meristems. [...] The apical meristem, along with the tiny developing leaves around it, is referred to as the terminal bud. The terminal bud is found at the end of each branch. In most young trees, normally one of the terminal buds grows straight up, and this is called the leader.

(Franklin and Mercker 2009: 2)

Our study of plant growth led us to draw a parallel between the region of the line around the tip of the pencil – the region of growth – and a leading apical meristem as it engenders primary growth in trees. A terminal bud includes numerous undifferentiated cells, which differentiate as the plants grow. In other words, as they go through the region of growth, some undifferentiated cells may become cells characteristic of stems, leaves, flowers or roots, while others reproduce as undifferentiated ones or just partially differentiated. Furthermore, the growth of new leaves in the branch of a

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tree, for instance, is minutely sensitive to distant conditions of temperature or humidity, as well as to the very local circumstances of the terminal bud. In other words, the events that take place in a terminal bud are responsive to the encompassing world, which prompts us to foreshadow that the embracing world is not external to the terminal bud, but very much immanent to it. An apical meristem growing at the end of a stem, as it begins to reproduce cells differentiated into those characteristic of leaves, is actualizing some of its vast virtual past: the distant past which has shaped the genome and the recent past accruing the tree’s life experiences and its surrounding conditions.

By drawing a parallel between the region of the line around the tip of the pencil and the apical meristem as it traverses primary growth in trees, we wondered on cells differentiating into, say, leaf tissue, and what they might suggest regarding the differentiation, along Julia’s line, from meandering to looping. This wonder led us to envision that it is from the immanence of surrounding and distant worlds embedding terminal buds and a pencil’s moving tip, that trees and lines grow. It also suggested to us that, similarly to how Julia improvised her line, trees improvise their growth letting a multiplicity of drives and inhibitions play out with changing and relative intensities. We are so used to taking a thinking subject endowed with selective ‘will-force’ as a condition for action, that the image we advance here for the nature of improvisation may, at times, sound unlikely and strange. Is a tree capable of improvising as much as we do? Is consciousness superfluous? We suggest that what we ordinarily refer to as consciousness may account for a heightened degree of nuanced sensibility and continuity with that which is immediate, distant and past, broadening the world of forces, inhibitions and releases from which action occurs. This suggestion is consistent with the notion that differences in improvisatory capacity by all living beings are matters of degree.

3. Rhythm and symmetry

In this section we focus on Julia’s tracing of a shape with multiple symmetries. Intuitively, the emergence of newly drawn symmetries seems to require planning and in-advance design. However, we will develop the thesis that symmetries are fluently improvised through an engagement with rhythms. Rhythms can be thought of as temporal symmetries which can give expression, by means of bodily movement, to spatial symmetries. Around 25 seconds within the minute students had to doodle, Julia starts to draw a line that takes up a prominent position in the centre of the page, still largely empty, rather than closer to the edges of the paper. The ensuing drawing, shown in Figure 4, suggests the vertical centreline of the paper as a line of symmetry and the horizontal centreline allocating the centre loop in the upward half and the two lateral loops in the lower half. One of the most striking aspects of this drawing is an overall ‘approximate’ symmetry, such as a mirror reflection with the vertical centreline as an axis and a partial vertical mirror symmetry with respect to the horizontal centreline. This motivates questions about the tracing of a symmetrical form. How could it arise

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other than through the tracing of a spatiotemporal trajectory explicitly pre-defined by Julia? How does its coming-to-be manage to shape it during a sliding present time, in the midst of its as-of-yet incompleteness?

We think that symmetry emerges from motoric rhythms organizing it. To clarify this hypothesis, it may be useful to examine the example of walking:

Healthy, adult gait is often characterized as a bilateral symmetrical behavior, and such symmetry is advantageous because it increases energetic efficiency. This symmetrical pattern is not found in the initial stages of walking, rather young infants move in an asymmetric fashion, eventually acquiring adult like patterns around 5 years of age.

(Hsiao-Wecksler et al. 2010)

The approximate symmetry of adult gait is achieved on the basis of the temporal occurrence of multiple and synchronized oscillatory processes involving all parts of the body (Sadeghi et al. 2000). Let us recall that living oscillatory phenomena, such as breathing, or heart cycles are rhythmic, not metric. Rhythms, while they often tend to preserve an average centring around certain time signatures, do not cease to vary around them, and are prompt to drift away from them in response to suitable circumstances. Therefore, it seems germane to assert that approximate symmetry arises from rhythms, or, in other words, that the temporal genesis of a symmetric form is rhythmic. Such rhythmic sources can be extremely complex, as in the case of walking in which limbs, trunk, hip, feet, toes and head adopt distinctive active cycles in mutual coordination.

Each of the loops in Figure 4 followed a rhythmic pattern with respect to acceleration with an entering high acceleration over most of the rounded shape and a rapid slowing down close to the self-crossing (see Figure 2). We conjecture that the rhythms generating the drawing shown in Figure 4 must have integrated, over time, the dual specular symmetry and the acceleration pattern. Additionally, if we imagine a circle passing through the three self-crossings in Figure 4, we can estimate that they are separated by around 120 degrees around the centre of the circle. This might be expressing a rhythm syncing the trace of each loop at more or less regular intervals, completing one cycle all around including the three loops.

4. Innovation

The thesis illustrated in this section is that some events may create quandaries that do not seem to be properly addressed by the repertoire of possibilities that has hitherto been practiced, creating circumstances for innovation. After playing with meandering lines and loops for 45 seconds, a somewhat disturbing event takes place – stepping outside of the page – that prompts the creation

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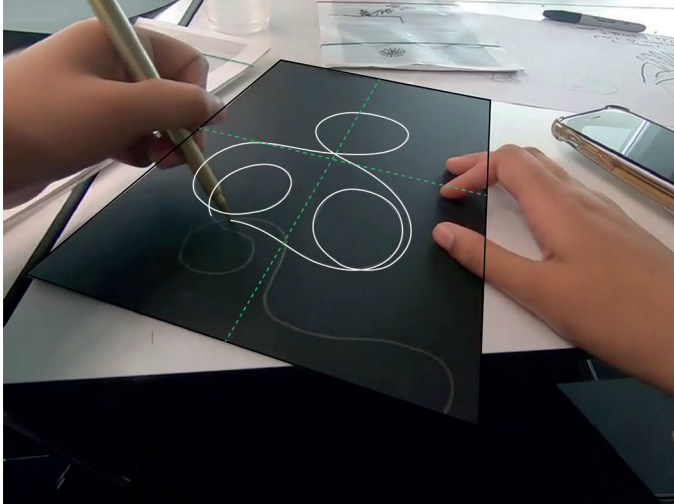


Figure 4a: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Drawing on the Central Region of the Page, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

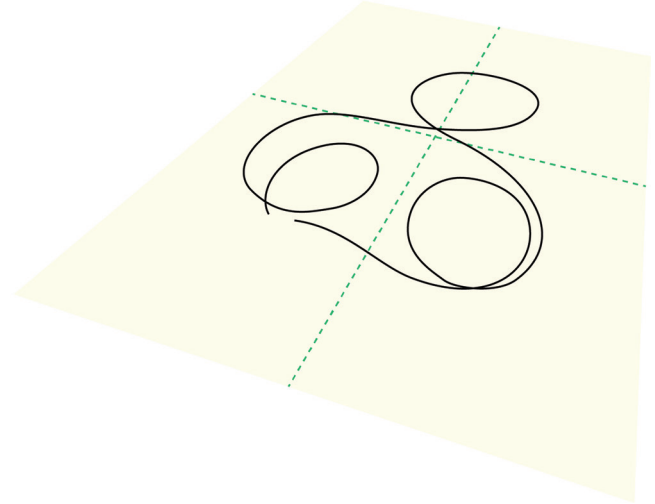


Figure 4b: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Same Drawing with the Page's Centrelines, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

of a new shape, a spiral, which then Julia repeats a few times. Around 45 seconds within the minute students had to doodle, Julia departed from a region nearby the upper edge of the page by continuing a line rightwards, meandering downwards and leftwards, then rightward and turning upward heading to the top right corner, which was relatively empty. However, the curve was open enough to go beyond the edge of the paper. Then the pencil stepped on the surface of the table. Figure 5a shows part of the drawing on the tabletop as it went leftward to re-enter the page; however, the pen stayed on the left side of the page's edge, pushing it and causing it to turn anticlockwise.

Julia lifts the pen to place it next to the edge but inside the page. She then continues a curve that would have been, more or less, the one traced if the pen had not pushed the page. Once inside the page, the line traces a new form: a spiral that goes inwards three times (Figure 5b). The line then crosses the three inward revolutions, going upwards towards starting a new spiral, which is similar to the previous one below, but clockwise (Figure 5c). Having reached the upper edge of the page, the line quickens on its way below.

In section 'Meandering and looping', we reflected on Julia's aiming towards upcoming forms, such as tangent points or edge regions, which foreshadow immediate-future aims modulating the formation of the ongoing trace. Sometimes some of these foreseen aims misfire because they contravene other prospects going for, such as, in this case, staying within the page. How once one is engaged in a certain rhythm, there is a tendency or impulse to complete its ongoing cycle before changing course, even if completing the present cycle proves to be disruptive (e.g. pushing the page around). In the course of a given rhythmic cycle we deal with a certain thrust that is already on its way and resists interruption. Eventually, it may get interrupted through discontinuities and hesitations, like the process of lifting the pen and re-entering the page. Rhythms, by being cyclical, allow us to anticipate and prepare the next cycle, letting the current one pursuing its completion 'on its own' while foreshadowing the one that is about to come. Rhythmic action goes by pulses.

The re-entering into the page (see Figure 5b) is itself an event triggering a new form to pursue, which turns out to be, in this case, an inward spiral. We may conceive of certain motivations for the inward spiral, such as countering, by way of going inwards, a prior outward expansiveness uncontained by the page, and it is plausible that this was part of the foreshadowing going on upon re-entering the page. Carrying on the right to left downwards directionality, the spiral adopted a counterclockwise turning around. The tracing of the spiral seemed to express a gradual accumulation of energy as the pen drew three centred and diminishing coils, that then appeared to be suddenly released by the line crossing them upwards to reach outside of the spiral. A brief meandering marked a transition towards a new spiral, similar to the prior one but, confined by the empty upper right corner of the page, it was smaller and clockwise. From the upper right corner, Julia meandered downwards to initiate another spiral (Figure 6).

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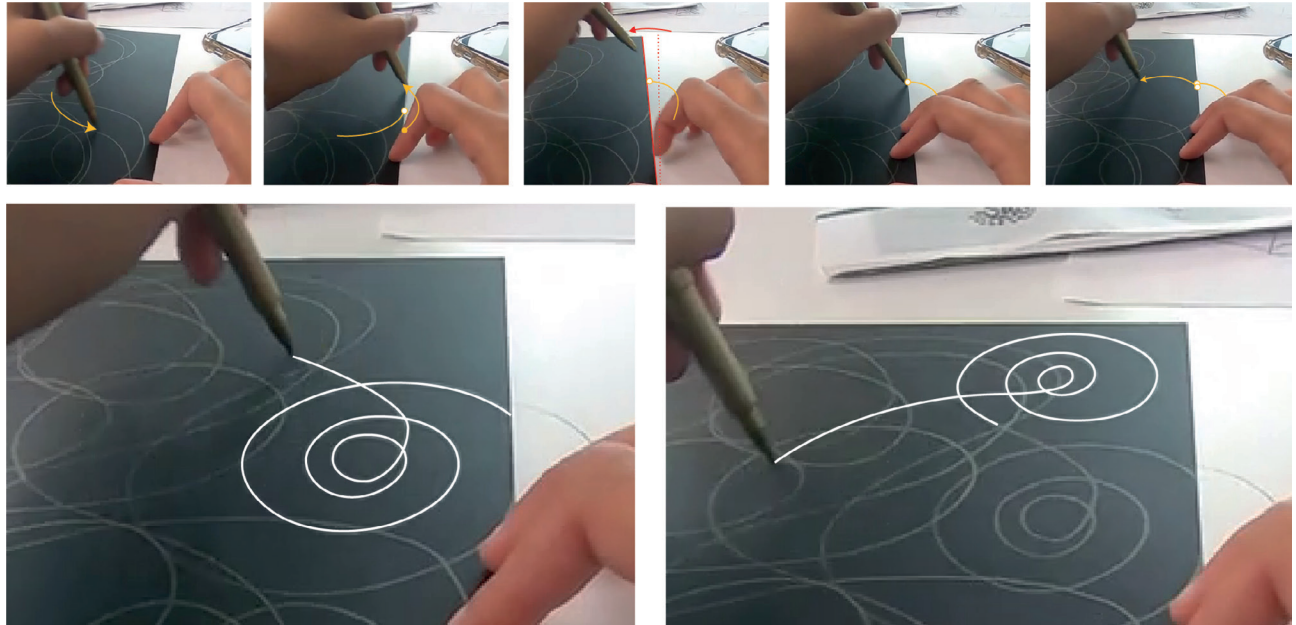


Figure 5: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Drawing on the Table, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.



Figure 6: Ricardo Nemirovsky and Tam Dibley, Two First Spirals, 30 August 2021. © Tam Dibley.

Discussion

Aleatory is a word that Boulez used in an article a long time ago which means throwing a dice and so forth. It's really chance, and I am vehemently against considering improvisation as chance music.

(Brown cited in Bailey 1992: 60–61)

Improvisation is neither chance nor a product of intelligent design, but the pre-eminent mode of live performance across all forms of life. Improvising entails openness to a quasi-autonomous play of forces, desires, inhibitions, memories, as well as of affects traversing materials, instruments and places. Our article explores this thesis by means of a case study on improvisatory drawing. Akin to how a wayfarer travels captivated by the surrounding world and bringing forth a life background of skilled readiness, Julia and her immense life experience with pens and papers trace a minute-long continuous line. The tip of her marker is surrounded by a halo or region of growth, meshing past and future, in which events occur and get launched, to continue unfolding the in-formation of a shape. Like an apical meristem in which cells differentiate and reproduce to gradually become leaves or stems, around the tip of the pen gradual transformations befall launching loops or meandering lines. Spontaneous symmetries appear led by the body engagement with rhythms, which synchronize or orchestrate hands, wrists, elbows, markers and gaze, all indirectly circumscribed by the borders of a black page.

A lot of improvisors find improvisation worthwhile because of the possibilities. Things that can happen but perhaps rarely do. One of those things is that you are 'taken out of yourself'. [...] You can do something you didn't realise you were capable of. Or you don't appear to be fully responsible for what you are doing.

(Bailey 1992: 115)

What is such 'being taken out of yourself' if not 'a line taking us for a walk' for the joint sprouting of innovations? This is the type of play with forms – arousing mutual tensions and harmonies, all relative to the canvas containing them – that Kandinsky (1979) has celebrated as the spiritual essence of all painting, made focal and overt by abstract painting.

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