


**SIGNIF-
ICANT
VELOC-
ITIES**



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Feeling at the Periphery of a Middle World

The planet is spinning beneath my feet at somewhere around 1,000 miles per hour, but I've not yet fallen over on account of this velocity. In fact, I'm not entirely certain that I've actually *felt* this velocity. Perhaps if I could stare up at the sky with the same eyes I use to stare out the passenger-side window of a car; perhaps then I would be able to recognize how the movements of the sun and stars are actually my own. But it is almost too baffling a thought—that the painfully slow celestial spectacle in front of my eyes is actually a reflection of the madly fast terrestrial merry-go-round beneath my feet. My inner ear is simply not convinced. And no matter how hard I believe it or try to understand it, this speed evades my senses with its constancy, its inertia and its immensity. I am the numb subject of a significant velocity.

My first instinct is to say that this is a problem of scale—that there exists an experiential teetering point past which a physicality, energy or duration becomes indecipherable. This is a point between whelmed and overwhelmed. I am reminded of James Hutton's report to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in which he noted that each sedimentary rock layer of his investigation was "in our measurement of time, a thing of indefinite duration".¹ While Hutton's "our" might be referring to the limitations of the 18th Century, I'd prefer to believe that he is referring to his (and "our") humanity—that the question of Earth's geological origin is not really fathomable to "our" minds. Maybe the reason that he can "find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end"² is simply because there aren't any for us. To quote John McPhee on the topic, "[n]umbers do not seem to work well with regard to deep time. Any number above a couple of thousand years—fifty thousand, fifty million—will[,] with nearly equal effect[,] awe the imagination to the point of paralysis".³ And while science might have since found both "vestige" and "prospect"—while geologists, astrophysicists and evolutionary biologists might have surmounted McPhee's paralysis to speak in megaannum, gigatonnes and lightyears—these are understandings of reason, just like my knowledge of a spinning Earth. These are not felt considerations. We've been outrun again by a factor of scale.

Perhaps it is because we are the product of our environment, and the human day-to-day is more minutes and rooms than it is æons and quasars. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins says –

our brains have evolved to help us survive within the orders of magnitude, of size and speed which our bodies operate at. We never evolved to navigate in the world of atoms [...] Rocks feel hard and impenetrable to our hands, precisely because objects like rocks and hands cannot penetrate each other.⁴

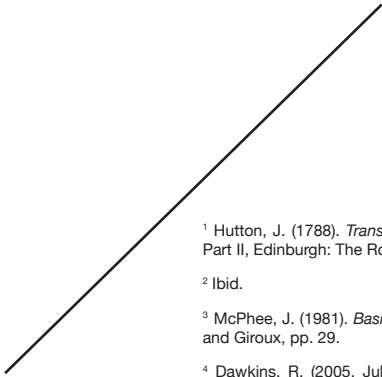
If we *had* evolved to navigate the sub-atomic world, then physically traversing the solidity of stone wouldn't be too difficult—and neither would quantum mechanics for that matter. But we didn't, and it is. Dawkins labels our bodily scale the "Middle World", where rocks are hard and years are slow. But how bound are we by this Middle World? After all, we are a society of professedly highly evolved and seemingly successful Middle Worlders, who have already overcome some limitations of the flesh; we have technologies and languages through which to investigate worlds beyond the Middle, collaborate and corroborate our findings beyond the self and prolong our knowledge beyond the body's expiration. Could we develop these tools or even build new ones that might help us navigate the deeper waters of other worlds? While our hands might never be able to penetrate rock, might we learn how to adjust our touch such that we can *real*-ise the enormity of the sub-atomic universe we've reasoned into existence? I'm not talking about the kind of conceptual knowing that happens in our minds, but rather a kind of experiential knowing that happens in our bodies. Not the reinterpretation of Bohr and Rutherford's visual atomic model, but a way we might learn to touch rock's subatomic space, hear its crystalline structure or smell its mineral energies. I'm wondering about the ways we might make other worlds—be they the sub-atomic or the interstellar—a bit more "Middle-World" real. And while our science and reason might provide the bricks and mortar for doing this, I suspect it will be our art and intuition that will lay the path.

This suspicion again comes from my gut. And while my mind finds it a bit boastful of my innards to openly support themselves, it is also respectful of the strange variety of artistic, scientific and philosophical experiences that they've digested. Experiences that have been guided by artworks have convinced me that this effort is possible, and writers like Merleau-Ponty and Bergson have helped me understand perhaps why that might be. The former opens an essay with the accusation that "[s]cience manipulates things and gives up living in them".⁵ While this

might be a bit of a bold and oversimplified statement, I find there is an important whisper of truth in it which gets clarified a few pages later. Essentially Merleau-Ponty observes that there is a disconnect between our scientific thinking and our reality. Science observes and considers *in general* and *from above*, like a third-person point of view, while our lives are lived in the first person—they are sited, specific and bodily.⁶ He continues on to champion the phenomenological as a mode of thinking, and he links this mode to the arts.⁷ After listening to Dawkins, I link this mode to the Middle World as well. Bergson articulates a similar point when he is grappling with the inadequacies of our understanding of time. He points out the differing intent and function of a model built for science and one built for our lives. And while our commonly used model might service the predictive needs of science, it is perhaps less useful in describing or understanding our own personal experiences.⁸ A search for a more *sensible* understanding of time is what leads him into his metaphysical discussion regarding intuition and duration. And again, we seem to be stubbing our toe on Dawkins' rock/hand problem—where what has been reasoned is not necessarily real to us, and what is real to us has not necessarily yet been reasoned.

So, there's work to do. And despite the fact that we might be limited to our Middle World, I still reckon we've got a chance. A chance to turn a stolen glimpse of another world into something more substantial, more significant. If there's an edge to our felt understanding then presumably there's also a space just before that edge, and this space seems to be a good place to start spending more of our time. Here we might be able to learn how to feel a little more planetary or pick up some survival skills for a future conversation with a spinning quark. I look to artists for interesting questions that challenge our Middle-Worlder position. I look to artworks to inform my senses about how weight, direction and time might all be interrelated; about how sands, soil and stones slip an hour-glass second as easily as they do a tectonic millennium; about how deep time, high time, fat time and long time are just varieties of *real* time; and how real time is something we might know something about—precisely because we've just spent some of *our* time here in these words.

Andrew Tetzlaff, 2018



¹ Hutton, J. (1788). *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, vol. I, Part II, Edinburgh: The Royal Society, pp. 209-304.

² Ibid.

³ McPhee, J. (1981). *Basin and Range*. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, pp. 29.

⁴ Dawkins, R. (2005, July). "Why the Universe seems so Strange". *TED Global*. [Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/richard_dawkins_on_our_queer_universe on 23 Sep 2018.]

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1993). Eye and Mind. In M.B. Smith and G. Johnson (Eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetic Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 121. (Original work published 1964).

⁶ Ibid., pp. 122-123. Specifically Merleau-Ponty writes, "[s]cientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the "there is" which precedes it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but this actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts."

⁷ Ibid., pp. 124, Merleau-Ponty writes, "we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions, but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement."

⁸ Bergson, H. (1946). *The Creative Mind*. (M. Anderson, Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., pp. 11-12. Bergson writes, "The measuring of time never deals with duration as duration; what is counted is only a certain number of extremities of intervals, or moments, in short, virtual halts in time. [...] In between these simultaneities anything you like may happen. Time could be enormously and even infinitely accelerated; nothing would be changed for the mathematician, for the physicist or for the astronomer. And yet the difference with regard to consciousness would be profound [...] the wait from one day to another, from one hour to the next would no longer cause it the same fatigue. Science cannot concern itself with this specific wait (or interval), and its exterior cause: even when it is dealing with time which is passing or which will pass, it treats it as though it had passed. This is, in fact, quite natural; the role of science is to foresee. It extracts and retains from the material world that which can be repeated and calculated, and consequently that which is not in a state of flow. Thus it does nothing but lean in the direction of common sense, which is a beginning of science: usually when we speak of time we think of the measurement of duration, and not of duration itself. But this duration which science eliminates, and which is so difficult to conceive and express, is what one feels and lives."



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I am an idea
I am an ideology
I am a life
I am alive
I am animate
I am animated
I am moving
I am being moved
I am a moving image
I am a narration
I am a thought form
I am a thinking body
I am a nexus of flows



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1 / Jacob Kirkegaard
Sabulation, 2010

Sound and video work from field recordings of Singing Sands, 30'00". Recorded in Oman 2009. Courtesy of the artist, Galleri Tom Christoffersen, Denmark, and Fridman Gallery, USA. Photography by Jacob Kirkegaard.

2 / Catherine Evans
Memory Muscle, 2014

7 unique 10" x 14" prints on unfixed black and white photographic paper allowed to fade in ambient light.

3 / Jeremy Bakker
Hands in the dark, 2018

Looped video on iPad, 8'59".

4 / Zoe Scoglio
Bringing ideas to life, 2018

Looped digital video, 0'23".

5 / Zoe Scoglio
Becoming Planetary, 2018

Looped digital video installation, 7'44".

6 / David Haines and Joyce Hinterding
Blue Hill Gravity Experiment, 2018

Steel, fossicked rock, sound. Courtesy of the artists and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Paddington. Photography by Ashley Barber.

PROJECT SPACE / SPARE ROOM
5 October to 15 November 2018
RMIT Building 94, Level 2

Significant Velocities considers the importance of felt and experiential knowledge by exploring how art might enable new understandings of the immense and oftentimes intangible qualities of the geological. Five artists consider the scale and expansiveness of our planet's velocities, timeframes, materialities and energies, and translate these abstractions into terms that can be felt. The resulting works provide keys that open up different way of understanding the realities of Earth's rotational speeds, mineral energies and deep time.

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The RMIT University School of Art manages INTERSECT – six creative projects that together form a dynamic program of exhibitions, residencies, creative laboratories, talks and events. These projects consider and use contemporary art as a means of intersecting with and enriching our University community, as well as our broader local and global ones. They are PROJECT SPACE, SPARE ROOM, SITUATE, SITE EIGHT, the LIGHTSCAPES and SPEAKER.

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