

**artistic agency and the
painting of sensation: francis
bacon's challenge to the
standard theory of action**

sean bowden

The paintings of Francis Bacon are associated in the popular imagination with scenes of horror and violence: contorted or mutilated bodies, screaming heads, and so on. Critics have occasionally argued that these images are reflections of the violent times and experiences through which Bacon lived: not only the war, but also the artist's sexual experiences, personal relationships and personal tragedies.¹ To focus on this aspect of his work, however, is to ignore Bacon's claim that he was not trying to represent horrors of various kinds, or to say something about the human condition or his own experiences. His artistic aim was rather to render, in paint, the dimension of sensation. As Bacon puts it, "I have never tried to be

horrific.”² He claims he rather wants “to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance” (I 73–5).

This is a point emphasized by Deleuze in his monograph on Bacon.³ Deleuze maintains that Bacon was not overly interested in painting *sensational* things or states of affairs. Rather, he took upon himself a task inherited from Cézanne—to “paint the sensation” (FB 35). Of course, it is true that, for the most part, Bacon paints bodies: figures or persons. His main focus, however, is the ambiguous sensation through which the body—he ostensible subject of the painting—forms itself in aesthetic experience. As Deleuze puts it, “[s]ensation is what is painted. What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation” (FB 35).

Importantly, for Bacon, sensation is not something that can be represented—or, as he prefers to put it, “illustrated”—in the same way that some already determinate object might be, whether physical or mental. This seems to be for two reasons, the first having to do with established painterly conventions in his chosen *medium* of communication, the second with the ambiguous nature of *what* he is trying to communicate in that medium. First, Bacon believes that most “illustrational painting” relies on conventional visual signs which “millions of art students all over the world can do” (I 147). Illustrational painting thus communicates only an intellectualised and “clichéd” way of representing bodies and their qualities and relations, obscuring the dimension of sensation through which bodies form themselves in aesthetic experience. As he puts it, he wants his paintings to come across “directly onto the nervous system,” as opposed to communicating a story “in a long diatribe through the brain” (I 18). Second, Bacon claims that what is being communicated—sensation, or the “fact” or “reality” of aesthetic experience—is in any case fundamentally ambiguous (I 66). In other words, sensation is not something determinate, possessing well-defined features that could subsequently be communicated in an illustrational manner. Consequently, Bacon believes, the direct communication of sensation in paint requires the experimental invention of a “non-illustrational” form that would be appropriate to the ambiguity of the

sensation to be captured.

In speaking of his particular painterly practice, Bacon claims that, in taking up his paints and approaching the canvas, he often knows *what* he wants to do, but does not know *how* to do it (I 116, 119, 155). As has already been indicated, this claim cannot mean that he wants to paint some precise image that he has in mind or some determinate object of experience before him, and that the painterly vocabulary or technical means required to render it currently elude his grasp. In fact, when he says he knows what he wants to do he seems to mean only that he has a vague sense of what he is trying to paint—such as “the strength of the sensation” that he has about two figures “in some form of sexual act of the bed” (I 119). As he puts it, “I don’t really think my pictures out ... I think of the disposition of the forms and then I watch the forms form themselves” (I 158). In other words, what Bacon wants to paint is not something he can clearly represent or picture to himself prior to the act of painting. How, then, can we make sense of Bacon’s claim that he does not know how to paint what he wants to paint when he cannot represent to himself what he wants to paint? It is to say that, distancing himself from illustrative clichés, he must experimentally *invent* some way to *see*, *discover* or *actualise* what he wants to paint, giving the initially indeterminate sensation the clarity of a form that was not foreseeable in advance.

This presents us with a problem. Bacon, it seems, can only get clearer about what he is trying to paint by successfully painting it. But what *counts* as success here cannot be specified prior to achieving it through some experimental invention. This is not to say, of course, that just any non-illustrational invention will successfully render what Bacon wants to paint. Indeed, Bacon is well known for destroying many of his paintings because he pushed them “too far” and lost something he was trying to capture (I 17–20). But again, against what criteria could Bacon judge one of his paintings to be a success or failure?

The task of this essay is to reconstruct Bacon’s understanding of the aims of his art, the nature of his artistic practice and his own agency, and then to examine the

implications of this account for what has become known as the “standard theory” in the philosophy of action. Drawing on Bacon’s interviews and developing several of Deleuze’s proposals in his monograph on Bacon, the article makes several claims. First, Bacon did not aim to represent or “illustrate” determinate objects of experience or intentional content, but rather to “actualise” sub-representational sensation. Second, the relation between Bacon’s paintings and what the paintings are paintings “of”—namely, sensation—should thus be understood, not in terms of representation, but rather *expression*: sensation is expressed in the production of a form that, as it were, makes it manifest by bringing it about or actualising it. Third, the expression of sub-representational sensation in Bacon’s paintings is inseparable from an experimental activity unfolding in a complex “expressive medium,” embracing the embodied, encultured and material dimensions of painterly practice. Fourth, because Bacon could not represent to himself the conditions of satisfaction constitutive of his artistic activity in advance of the act of painting, he understood these conditions to be progressively specified in and through what is a self-consciously experimental but situated process. Finally, I will conclude by considering the challenge that this account of artistic action and agency presents to standard theories in the philosophy of action and propose a way to meet that challenge.

SENSATION, FORCE AND THE FORMATION OF FORM

Sensation—or, as he sometimes refers to it, “feeling”—is not, for Bacon, something merely subjective that is provoked by or associated with the apprehension of a determinate object, whether physical or mental. While he sometimes appears to express himself in this way, talking of his feelings “about” a particular thing (I 186), a constant theme in his interviews with David Sylvester is that sensation cannot simply be added to or subtracted from the reality to be painted—because the reality to be painted does not exist independently of the dimension of sensation (see, for example, I 31, 76, 150, 193–8).

Drawing on Bacon’s interviews, as well as Maldiney’s and Merleau-Ponty’s

phenomenological treatments of sensation in Cézanne, Deleuze develops an account of the dimension of sensation in Bacon that consolidates and clarifies a large number of the artist's otherwise obscure remarks. Deleuze argues that, as in Cézanne, what Bacon means by sensation should be understood to implicate both the subject and the object of the aesthetic experience—both the sensing and the sensed, as it were—in a process that mutually transforms them. As Deleuze puts it,

Sensation has one face turned toward the subject ... and one face turned toward the object ... Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation (FB 34–5).⁴

Deleuze's understanding of the relation between sensation and the emergence of new forms in, and of, experience, is detailed at greater length in his earlier work, *Difference and Repetition*. In this book, Deleuze elaborates what he calls a "transcendental empiricism," which concerns the emergence of the conditions of experience *from* experience, or rather from certain kinds of experiences: those for which our ways of grasping the world, previously established in us, are inadequate.⁵ In outline, his argument unfolds as follows.⁶ Occasionally, we encounter things we cannot identify, that we had never imagined possible, that we have no prior experience of, that our habituated skills cannot cope with, and so on. An encounter with such a non-identifiable "difference" could only be described as a "shock", and the encountered object's primary characteristic for us, Deleuze argues, is that it "can only be sensed." We are troubled by such encounters, but *what* troubles us is not yet identifiable or determinate for us. Beginning with this "problematic" sensation, then, our various capacities—embodied and psychological habits, memory, imagination, the conceptual understanding, etc.—are forced beyond their prior limits and experimentally transformed in order to resolve the problem

presented to it. New habits and skills will need to be developed; memory will be forced to creatively synthesize past experiences in order to produce something that could help make sense of the present situation; the imagination will be constrained to phantasise about previously unimaginable connections between phenomena; conceptual thought will be compelled to devise new concepts that could be adequate to the novel event, and so on. As with the discussion of the dimension of sensation in Bacon, then, at one and the same time in this process the subject is transformed in the sensation and something happens through the sensation, “one through the other, one in the other”: that which can only be sensed transforms the apprehending subject and hence the determinate objects that this subject is capable of apprehending.

When Deleuze claims that Bacon paints sensation, then, he is not claiming that Bacon’s images somehow represent or are about his subjective feelings for things that exist independently of those feelings. He is rather claiming that the images Bacon paints—indeed, his very activity of painting—give expression to a process of emergent experience at the border between subject and object, or between sensing and what is sensed. To paint sensation, in other words, is to give painterly expression to the formation of novel forms in and of experience, and to do so by bringing about or actualising a novel form in a non-illustrational way, pushing beyond the limits of conventional painterly vocabularies. What, then, could it mean to say that Bacon wants to paint sensation as “accurately” as possible (I 94)? Deleuze would no doubt claim that, beneath the clichéd or habitual ways of grasping and presenting already formed bodies and their qualities and relations, there is an experiential reality consisting of the ongoing formation of new forms, and the task of the painter is to overcome the inadequacy of illustrational clichés and to make this reality manifest by actualising it in a particular way—participating in the formation of novel, non-illustrational forms in some local situation.

Deleuze attempts to further explain the aim of Bacon’s art with reference to a notion of force. It should be noted that while this notion and its various cognates play a large role in Deleuze’s wider processual philosophy, Bacon himself has very

little to say about it apart from occasional allusions to a person's "energy" (e.g., I 197). Be that as it may, the notion of force arguably helps us make sense both of what Bacon means by the sub-representational "violence of reality" that directly impacts the nervous system, and of his artistic attempts to "remake" that violence (I 94). Deleuze claims that, "for a sensation to exit, a force must be exerted on a body" (FB 56). Such a claim, however, needs to be understood in terms of Deleuze's differential and "energetic" conception of the world. For Deleuze, bodies of all kinds—subjects as well as objects—along with their generation, modification and dissolution, are the result of complex relations between internal and external forces of various types and at various levels. Moreover, forces themselves are irreducibly relational entities: a given force is what it is, or does what it does, only by virtue of its differential relation to other forces. Every force, and every body, already entails a complex of force relations. At the bottom, for Deleuze, reality simply is a differential field of forces and force relations which produce, alter and destroy organised bodies. Deleuze calls this field of forces the "body without organs"—emphasising its difference from and metaphysical priority with respect to the "organization or organs we call an organism"—and claims that it is Bacon's primary subject matter (FB 44–6). Or more precisely, while Bacon's ostensible subject matter is a given body—figure, person, organic form, etc.—Bacon's *real* subject matter is the plurality of forces that forms and deforms that body in experience. Or again, what amounts to the same thing, the real subject matter of Bacon's painting is a body experienced as sustaining a sensation under the impetus of a complex of forces (FB 35). While Bacon remains vague about what, for him, constitutes "reality", he clearly distinguishes between the ostensible subject matter of his painting and the reality it presupposes—a reality that is of a different nature to the ostensible subject matter, and that is the true subject of his painting (see, for example, I 202–4).

We will need to explore in more detail below Bacon's idiosyncratic method for accessing and painting the reality presupposed by his initial subject matter. For now, the claim is that Deleuze's work offers us a compelling account of this reality

in energetic terms, that is, in terms of differential force relations exerted on and transforming bodies in experience. These forces are responsible for the ongoing production of forms in and of experience and, considered from the perspective of their complex differential relations, outstrip all produced forms. The question that arises now, however, is how can Bacon make anything visibly intelligible, let alone an imperceptible energetic reality, in the absence of a conventional or illustrative painterly vocabulary?

EXPRESSION, NOT ILLUSTRATION

Bacon, as has already been indicated, distances himself from representational or illustrational painting for two reasons. He claims, firstly, that the reality he wants to paint—namely, sensation—is “ambiguous.” It does not possess determinate features and relations whose characteristics could be communicated by means of an intelligible system of visual signs. Secondly, he claims that illustrational painting tends to consist of a system of well-established visual signs that communicate only a “clichéd” manner of representing bodies and their qualities and relations, and so one that would fail to capture any aspects of the subject matter falling outside of its ambit. This is not to say, however, that Bacon abandons illustration altogether. Insofar as he is interested in painting the way that the bodies ordinarily depicted by illustrational painting are formed in and through sensation in experience, illustrational elements will be present in his work. As he puts it, referring to some of his portraits, “inevitably illustration has to come into it to make certain parts of the head and face which, if one left them out, one would then only be making an abstract design” (I 147). However, he cannot communicate the real subject of his painting—forces, sensation and the formation of form—by illustrational means. His painting must rather come across “directly onto the nervous system,” as opposed to telling a “story in a long diatribe through the brain” by means of already-established, and so easily comprehended, visual clichés (I 18).

How are we to make sense of the way Bacon’s paintings directly impact the nervous system, or open up sensation? How can one paint the “invisible” energetic reality

that Deleuze claims is Bacon's primary subject matter? Moreover, how can one paint energetic reality from within, given that the painter, and the very act of painting, cannot be separated out from that reality? Indeed, sensation and force here seem to be at work at several levels: not only is Bacon painting the reality of a body sustaining a sensation under the influence of forces, Bacon as a painter is sustaining a complex sensation as well—struck by the way that the ostensible subject matter of the painting (the person with all their “pulsations” [I 196]), along with the coloured experiment unfolding on the canvas, problematise the illustrational clichés Bacon has inherited and call for the formation of a new form. Consequently, far from attempting to illustrate an energetic reality as though from some external point of view, Bacon's paintings should be understood to participate *in* that energetic reality by giving active *expression* to it. As Bacon puts it, “I'm not really trying to *say* anything, I'm trying to *do* something” (I 222). In other words, Bacon's practice of painting, including the antagonistic relation this practice maintains with the history of visual culture, must itself be understood in terms of complexes of forces. Bacon's painting, from this perspective, should be considered as a form of forceful, experimental participation—informed by but also transforming the history and norms of his artistic medium—in an energetic, processual reality. But more than just participating in an energetic reality, Bacon's painting takes this reality as his subject matter *in* a given situation (the ostensible subject of the painting being a kind of “bait” for the energetic, processual reality that is painted [I 202–4]).

In the following section, we will examine Bacon's complex relation to his chosen medium. In this section, we will define the relation of expression that holds between Bacon's paintings and their subject matter. In general, expression is a relation between two things, two *relata*: an expression (that which does the expressing) and an expressed (that which the expression expresses), such that the expression makes manifest an otherwise unmanifested expressed. Indeed, it is in this way that we might say, for example, that emotions or attitudes are expressed in facial expressions and gestures, or that thoughts are expressed in words, or that

unconscious desires are expressed in overt behaviour, and so on. More rigorously, there are four characteristics of the expressive relation between expressions and expresseds:

1. *Ontological feature*: the expressed is ontologically inseparable from its expression—it exists in being expressed by its expressions, although it is not identical with them.
2. *Epistemological feature*: the expression communicates something about the expressed by virtue of the way that it “makes sense” (in both the passive and active senses of this phrase) within an expressive medium.
3. *Causal feature*: the expressed is to be considered the immanent cause of the expression, which is to say, a type of non-linear cause that is informed by the effects it produces over time.
4. *Productive feature*: the expressed is not something that is fully formed prior to its expression. The expression does something—it is a kind of dynamic “actualising” of the expressed.

A detailed account of the relation of expression is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice to indicate here that each of these features regularly appear, albeit emphasised in different ways, in accounts of the expressive relation that holds between various relata: the expression of emotions and attitudes in bodily gestures,⁷ the expression of emotion in art,⁸ the expression of thought in language,⁹ the expression of intentions in action,¹⁰ the expression of values in law,¹¹ and the expression of Being in beings.¹²

Turning back to Bacon, we can begin to appreciate how his art *expresses* rather than represents or illustrates its subject matter.

1. In terms of the expressive relation’s ontological aspect, as has already

been indicated, the energetic reality that Bacon aims to paint (the expressed) exists *in* the processes productive of novel forms (the expressions). Or, more fully, the reality to be painted by Bacon is the process through which sensation and its invisible conditioning forces give rise to new forms in and of experience in some local situation; and Bacon's practice of painting gives expression to this reality by participating in and embodying such a process, making it manifest (in a way we still need to explore) in the production of new forms.

2. In terms of expression's epistemological feature, Bacon's paintings communicate something about the reality of forces, sensation and the formation of forms by making that reality manifest in a particular way within the medium of painting. The question of how this expressive power of his painting is to be understood is addressed in more detail in the following section.
3. In terms of the expressive relation's causal feature, enough has already been said to indicate that the energetic reality which Bacon's paintings give expression to is causally responsible for the experimental production of his painterly forms (force as the condition of sensation). This causality, however, should be considered an immanent or non-linear cause, insofar cause and effect are not independent of one another. Bacon's forms are effects only in the sense that they actualise and transform the energetic reality they presuppose *from within*, which is to say that the cause is inseparable from, and informed and transformed by, the various effects it gives rise to over time.
4. Finally, it is clear that what is expressed by Bacon's paintings is not something that is fully formed prior to its expressions. The energetic reality of differential relations between forces that is the expressed

subject of Bacon's paintings exists in a state of potentiality that Bacon's paintings actualise and transform. It is in this sense that the expression of energetic reality in paint *does* something rather than says something, even if, as will be seen, Bacon's paintings still "communicate" something through what they do in their medium.

PAINTING AS AN EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM

What needs to be explained is how the activity of painting is capable of expressing sensation and the forces that condition it. Indeed, how is it that painting can make manifest or communicate something over and above the brute materiality of its components? Why is it that not every combination of paint on canvas is a painting of sensation in Bacon's sense? Why does Bacon claim that the painter's "instinct" must be rooted in cultivation, practice and knowledge, and that the instinctive art of children is ultimately unsatisfactory (I 112)? It will be useful, firstly, to distinguish the different basic elements of Bacon's paintings. Subsequently, we will need to understand what it is about the artistic medium of painting, and Bacon's particular relation to that medium, that allows him to communicate something through his art.

Arguably, we can analyse the majority of Bacon's works into five constitutive elements: (i) the form or figure; (ii) the more or less monochromatic background, characterised by a "shallow" depth; (iii) the variable contours that circumscribe the figure and connect foreground and background (which may appear as a ring, oval, square, box, pipe, rug, bed, etc.); (iv) the relations of colour in which the first three elements converge; and (v) local areas of "blurriness" established through the application of "free" marks or scrubbing. Deleuze provides us with an extended example that focuses on the first four elements in *Figure at a Washbasin* (1976):

There is a large, monochrome ochre *shore* as a background, which provides the armature. There is the contour as an autonomous power (the reef)—it is the crimson of the mattress or cushion on which the Figure is standing, a crimson that is combined with the black of the disk and contrasted

with the white of the crumpled newspaper. Finally, there is the Figure, like a *flow* of broken tones—ochres, reds, and blues. But there are still other elements. First, there is the black blind that seem to cut across the field of ochre; then the washbasin, itself a bluish broken tone; and the long curved pipe, a white marked with manual daubs of ochre, which surrounds the mattress, the Figure, and the washbasin, and which also cuts across the field ... The washbasin is like a second autonomous contour which surrounds the Figure's head, just as the first surrounded its foot. And the pipe is itself a third autonomous contour, whose upper half divides the field of colour in half. As for the blind, ... it falls between the field and the Figure, in such a way that it occupies the shallow depth that separates them and relates the entire painting to one and the same plane. It is a rich communication of colours. The Figure's broken tones incorporate not only the pure tone of the field but also the pure tone of the red cushion, adding to it bluish tones that resonate with the tone of the washbasin, a broken blue that contrasts with the pure red (FB 145–6).

With regard to the local “blurriness” or, as Deleuze calls it, the “diagram”—whose role in Bacon's painterly practice will be examined in more detail below—we can understand this to function in two ways. First of all, insofar as the blurriness results from the application of free marks (flicked paint, scrubbing already applied paint, etc.) without foresight or control, it thwarts the artist's habitual reliance on those illustrative clichés that would prevent the emergence of a new form (FB 99–100).³³ Secondly, the non-illustrative marks left on the canvas open up new “possibilities” for the formation of forms, by liberating colours and colour relations whose progressive modulation will constitute the pictorial whole (FB 101–102, 120–21). In an interesting exchange, Bacon lists three types of “accidents” that produce the blurry sections of his canvases, and describes the role they have in opening up various “possibilities of fact”:

One [such accident] would be when you were exasperated with what you had done and either with a cloth or with a brush freely scrubbed over it. A

second would be when you painted impatiently and make marks across the form in annoyance. A third might be when you painted absent-mindedly ... I think that you can make, very much as in abstract painting, involuntary marks on the canvas which may suggest much deeper ways by which you can trap the fact you are obsessed by ... [T]he marks are made, and you survey the thing like you would a sort of graph. And you see within this graph the possibilities of all types of fact being planted ... [F]or instance, if you think of a portrait, you maybe at one time have put the mouth somewhere, but you suddenly see through this graph that the mouth could go right across the face (I 60-5).

But now, how can the pushing of paint, as it were, be expressive of something beyond its mere material presence? How is it that what Bacon does with the elements of his paintings expresses or communicates something, namely, sensation, force relations and the formation of form? Bacon claims in an interview that “to be a painter now ... you have to know, even if only in a rudimentary way, the history of art from prehistoric times right up to today” (I 223). Bacon does not elaborate on why this is, except to say that his study of both historical and contemporary visual images has affected his whole attitude to visual things, “by showing the acuteness of the visual image that you have got to make” (I 224). By this, he appears to mean that the expressive power of his images is due to their relationship to a certain history of visual culture. But this simply pushes the question further back: how is it that artists and consumers of art, at any given moment in the history of the visual arts, can experience the distribution of coloured paint on a two-dimensional surface as expressive of something?

In a study of Deleuze’s work on Bacon, and with reference to several historians and philosophers of art including Riegl, Worringer and Maldiney, Ronald Bogue argues that, in Bacon’s works, there is a struggle to solve a number of problems that were also faced by painters in the past. These problems centre on the question of the relation between the hand and the eye, or between the tactile and the optical—both of which are factors in visual experience and the practice of painting. With

regard to visual perception, as Merleau-Ponty argues, vision is not pure. What we “see” is informed by, and cannot be abstracted out from, our embodied nature and embodied capacities such as touch.¹⁴ As Bogue elaborates, following the analyses of Riegl in *Late Roman Art Industry*:

Touch is superior to vision in providing information about the material impenetrability of objects, but vision surpasses touch in informing us about the height and width of objects, since it is able to synthesize multiple perceptions more quickly than touch. A sense of depth, however, comes only through touch, since the eye sees only planes. And a knowledge of objects as three-dimensional forms requires the subjective synthesis of multiple tactile and visual experiences of entities ... Hand and eye reinforce one another in a fundamental way, since our vision of objects as impenetrable, three-dimensional entities necessarily incorporates within it knowledge gained from tactile experience. Hence Riegl speaks of a tactile or *haptic* vision (from the Greek *hapto*, to touch), in which the contributing role of touch is emphasized.¹⁵

The problem for painters, then, is how to work with the contributions made by both touch and sight in the visual apprehension of their art. But this problem of the hand-eye relation in visual perception is mirrored in the problem of the relation between the hand and the eye in the act of painting itself. As Deleuze puts it, setting aside a popular image of the practice of painting, “it is obviously not enough to say that the eye judges and the hand executes,” as though the eye enjoyed a privileged relation to thought that is lacking in the subservient hand (FB 154). The relation between hand and eye is rather much more complex. There is a dynamic exchange between the two and, as such, presents the painter with a problem to solve in their practice. Consider, for example, the “solution” to this problem developed in the strongly “manual” techniques characteristic of expressionist painting, compared with the rather more precise and controlled brushwork found in highly “optical” Renaissance or Baroque painting, or even contemporary “photorealism.” Or again, as Bacon remarks in relation to his own

practice, which occupies a kind of middle ground between the two approaches:

With oil paint being so fluid, the image is changing all the time while you're working ... I don't think that generally people really understand how mysterious, in a way, the actual manipulation of oil paint is. Because moving ... the brush one way rather than the other will completely alter the implications of the image. But you could only see it if it happened before you ... It's really a continuous question of the fight between [manual] accident and [visual, intellectual] criticism (I 140).

The hand-eye relation is obviously central to the problematic relation between figure, ground, immediate sense experience and mediating thought in the aesthetic individuation of painterly forms, but also in question historically is the way that the painterly relation between figure and ground gives expression to various metaphysical concerns.¹⁶ The perception of an object as a three-dimensional form, as already indicated, requires a synthesis of multiple tactile and visual experiences of entities, but how is this to be achieved in relation to the flat surface of the canvas? What kind of geometry, what ordering of values or colours are needed for a figure to emerge from a background on what is manifestly a two-dimensional surface? And how can considerations bearing on the aesthetic emergence of form be reconciled with or give expression to background (philosophical, religious, etc.) beliefs regarding the production of forms more generally?

We need not claim that this exhausts the problems treated by painters in the history of visual culture. It is also not necessary to claim that all painters were aware of or consciously grappled with these particular problems. Nevertheless, it is plausible to claim that many of the different periods and innovations throughout the history of what we call painting can be grouped together insofar as they offer coloured solutions, as it were, to a series of overlapping and criss-crossing problems—a series in which the above mentioned problems would feature prominently. It might be objected, of course, that what is most prominent in the history of painting is representation or depiction—for example, the painterly depiction of

some object so that an audience might recognise it, or the artist's communication through paint of some determinate intentional content that the painting is about (even in "abstract" painting), etc. Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that the very capacity to produce representational paintings throughout history, and to have them understood as representing some thing or idea, *depends* on painters developing solutions to problems such as those mentioned above: the relation between hand and eye in both visual experience and the act of painting; the relation between figure, ground, sense experience and thought; and the relation between conceptions of aesthetic and metaphysical individuation. It will be argued here that, whatever else painting does or has done (such as represent things and ideas), paintings are inseparable from their problematic conditions and "make sense" as instances of solution to these problems. Painting, it is argued here, is an "expressive medium" to the extent that what painters do in this medium with the various elements of painting (line, colour, shape, etc.) communicates something by resolving or "actualising" painting's problematic conditions in a particular way. Moreover, when a given solution is maintained and replicated this gives rise to painterly conventions or norms which in turn inform the medium (recognisable painterly "styles"), such that paintings can "make sense" or be seen as meaningful, not only as solutions to the above-mentioned problems, but by instantiating or differing from painterly conventions in particular instances. In short, paintings express or communicate something over and above their mere material presence by "making sense" in both the passive and the active senses of this phrase: they can passively "make sense" in relation to a background of painterly norms or conventions (Bacon's illustrative "clichés") which allows certain aspects of the image to show up in meaningful ways, but they can also actively create meaning or "*make* sense" by shaping and reshaping these background norms through novel resolutions of painting's problematic conditions.

To more fully appreciate what it means to make a visual image in light of its problematic conditions, and more particularly, to thereby understand the "acuteness" of Bacon's own visual images, we can take up Bacon's suggestion

above and sketch a rudimentary outline of the history of the visual arts. A full treatment of this history clearly lies beyond the scope of this essay, so we will lean on Deleuze's account of Bacon's idiosyncratic "recapitulation" of several moments in the history of painting (see FB Ch.14–15). In so doing, we will briefly indicate the way a number of different periods and styles in the history of the visual arts express the problematic conditions mentioned above—from Egyptian bas-relief, to classical Greek painting, Byzantine mosaics and murals, Gothic ornament, modern abstract painting and modern "colourism." Clearly, as E. H. Gombrich has put it, such a history of the visual arts "is not a story of progress in technical proficiency" or the capacity to represent things in a realistic way, "but a story of changing ideas and requirements" that are related, as I have argued here, to painting's problematic conditions, embracing perceptual, aesthetic and metaphysical considerations.¹⁷

Following Riegl's analysis of ancient Egyptian bas-relief, Deleuze argues that the delineated figures of that period stand out from their ground insofar as they share one and the same "tactile" plane, over which the viewer's eye, informed by the sense of touch, can "feel" or "grasp" the contour that is their common limit (or, to put this in a slightly less ocularcentric way, perhaps it is less the eye that feels and more the hand or sense of touch that "sees" for us in such instances). Deleuze proceeds to argue that the strong geometric contours of bas-relief isolate the form as a material "essence" in the sense that they enclose and unify the form—that is, the body, whose rendering combines both profile and frontal views in order to show it in as much completeness as possible—emphasising for perception the figure's impenetrability and protecting it from change and becoming (FB 122–3). In relation to this last point, as Gombrich notes, Egyptian art was created for the purpose of ensuring that the dead would continue to live in the afterlife: they believed that the body must be preserved if the soul is to live on in the beyond.¹⁸ In other words, Egyptian bas-relief is informed by metaphysical ideas about the nature of bodies and their relation to time and the afterlife, and exploits the way that vision is inhabited by the sense of touch in order to present the material

essence and impenetrability of individual bodies in an easily perceptible form.

Bacon professed an admiration for Egyptian art, especially its sculpture, and the figure of the Sphinx appears in a number of his works (I 132, 198). Following Deleuze's analyses, the expressive power of his paintings can be understood in relation to some of the features of Egyptian art. In Bacon, figure and ground occupy, if not a single visual plane, then a foreground and background characterised by an extremely "shallow" depth that is a long way from the organization of perspectival depth in the optical space of classical representation (FB 136). Echoing the Egyptians, Bacon also declares a desire for durability, essence, or eternity, insofar as he aims to capture reality "raw and alive and ... finally fossilized" (I 76; FB 123). As opposed to Egyptian art's strong, geometrical delineation of a material essence, however, Bacon's figures are inseparable from "accidental" variations (FB 134–5). In fact, nowhere is this particular contrast more evident than in his *malerisch* treatment of the figure of the Sphinx in the 1950s.

Classical Greek (and later, Renaissance) painting also took the "accident" as its object: the irregular contours of organic and changing bodies seen at a particular moment and from a particular point of view, as well as the shifting visual phenomena of light and shadow. In contrast to Egyptian bas-relief, Greek painting distinguishes foreground and background planes and makes of the contour, no longer the common limit of figure and ground on a single plane, but the self-limitation of a form in the foreground. A perspective traverses the separated planes in depth, and the variable play of light and shadow is used to model the figure, suggest depth and volume in the space between the planes, and distinguish figure and ground. Following Worringer, Deleuze argues that the Greeks, aided by reason, subjected "accidental" visual phenomena to a form of well-founded optical organisation, making of the accident a manifestation of essence—not the essence of the object this time, but that of the human artist themselves, understood in terms of their organic vitality and activity, enjoying themselves and their own vital movements in an art that reflects life's variable, dynamic rhythms.¹⁹ As Worringer puts it, the Greek artist remoulds the phenomenal world of sense in accordance with the

image they have of themselves: “he no longer evades accidental appearance, but merely modifies it in consonance with ... his own sense of vitality, of which he has become joyfully conscious.”²⁰ In other words, in classical representation, what the painted figure or form is primarily “about” is not so much the thing whose outward appearance is to be depicted, but rather a “form of representation” whose rules would gradually be refined (especially during the Renaissance), and that expresses above all the organic life of the human being: at one with the organic world in which they joyfully participate, and of which they are in some sense the measure (FB 126).

The relation between hand and eye in Greek art clearly changes as well. Whereas in Egyptian bas-relief the eye assumes a “haptic” function in which the role of touch is prominent (one “sees” with one’s hand or sense of touch, as it were), in classical representation “tactile values” play a secondary, though still indispensable role. The modelling of the visual figure in the gradation of light obviously lends the figure a sculptural quality, giving the eye some visual referents with which to “feel” the organic contour in the complex play of shadow and light. As Deleuze argues, however, the sense of touch is here subordinated to the eye insofar as it is drawn upon only with the aim of perfecting the optical form (FB 127).²¹

Needless to say, Bacon’s treatment of accidental variation significantly departs from classical representation, insofar as he eschews the subjection of the accident both to a perspectival organisation and to the manifested essence of humanity revelling in its own vitality and the beauty of organic form. Indeed, to the extent that Bacon still speaks of the essence of his art, what is essential for him (what endures) is nothing over and above the accident: fortuitous encounters between forces, sensation and the ongoing formation of form—the violence of reality in which the artwork, its ostensible subject and the artist themselves are all immersed.

Following Deleuze’s potted history, after classical Greek painting, visual art develops in two different directions—towards the elaboration of an optical space

that is increasingly free of tactile values, represented in his account by Byzantine art, and towards the imposition of a manual space in which the artist's hand becomes expressionistic and assumes a certain independence with respect to the eye, such as in Gothic ornament (FB 127). Byzantine mosaics and murals, although clearly indebted to Greek painting, display a lack of concern with the observation of nature. Artists no longer measured their forms against reality, or set out to discover new ways to represent organic bodies, or created the illusion of depth in perspectival space.²² Their religiously inspired figures rather issue from a purely optical field of light and colour that engenders spatiality and form without relying on tactile values—such as the Christ Pantocrator in the Cefalù Cathedral which emerges from a bright gold background and seems to freely float in a space that extends out to embrace the viewer, who in turn clearly “sees” that they are in the realm of the sacred.²³ Random tiles of gold and silver were often placed in figures to enhance the play of light and faces were modelled with tiles of contrasting colours to create the illusion of chromatic modulation. As Deleuze summarizes it, Byzantine forms “depend increasingly on the alternation of light and dark, on the purely optical play of light and shadows. The tactile referents are annulled, and even the contour ceases to be a limit, and is now the result of shadow and light, or black shores and white surfaces” (FB 128). The way that the play of light and, more particularly, colour engenders spatiality and form is also central to Bacon's work. As Deleuze will argue, however, Bacon recovers a “haptic” treatment of colour that differs from its optical treatment in Byzantine art.

In the other direction, following Worringer, Deleuze argues that the complex lines of Gothic ornament represent a manual as opposed to optical departure from classical, organic representation. These ornamental lines of “super-organic expressiveness” no longer delineate precise figures, but are rather the abstract geometric lines of a “linear fantasy” that intertwine with one another, senselessly run back on themselves, or are checked and diverted into new complications of expression, forming a restless tumult which the eye can barely follow, and that seems to have a will of its own.²⁴ In this ceaseless linear play in which manual

expressiveness tends to free itself from the judging eye, not only does the Gothic line not outline anything, “the powers of the line and the plane tend to be equalized” and, consequently, the distinction between form and ground tends to disappear (FB 130). Plant and animal motifs do appear in Gothic ornamentation, but they are quickly absorbed within a maze of lines that is

common to different animals, to the human and the animal, and to pure abstraction ... [T]he accident is everywhere ... It is as if organisms were caught up in a whirling or serpentine movement that gives them a single “body” or unites them in a single “fact”, apart from any figurative or narrative connection (FB 130–31).

As Bogue rightly notes, the resonance with Bacon’s art here is clear: the Gothic line performs a similar function to Bacon’s local areas of “blurriness,” insofar as they are both apparently random, manual “catastrophes” that deform the illustrative image and subsume it within a field of nonorganic forces, while at the same time presenting a “graph” or “diagram” that opens up new possibilities for a figural becoming that expresses these forces.²⁵

It should also be noted, following Worringer, that the Gothic line has metaphysical significance. It involves a kind of “longing to be absorbed in an unnatural intensified activity of a non-sensuous, spiritual sort ... in order to get free, in this exaltation, from the pressing sense of the constraint of actuality.” This longing which created such ornament, moreover, “was what gave rise to the fervent sublimity of the Gothic cathedral, that transcendentalism in stone,” whose slender and complex structure of thin shafts and ribs seems to eliminate everything heavy and earthly.²⁶ Of course, while Bacon’s art similarly strives to break free from the constraints of actuality (conventional or illustrational ways of grasping reality), its metaphysical orientation seems to lie in the direction of the sensuous and chaotic world of impersonal forces that is responsible for the formation and deformation of forms, as opposed to a spiritual ascension.

Closer to Bacon's time, Deleuze suggests that the two kinds of break with classical representation found in optical Byzantine art and manual Gothic art are echoed, respectively, in the highly optical art of formal or geometric abstraction and the strongly manual art of abstract expressionism (FB 103–10). While Bacon shares with such movements a rejection of illustrative clichés, his antipathy to abstraction is well known from his interviews. On the one hand, Bacon claims, formal abstraction “is only interested in the beauty of its patterns or its shapes” in a purely optical space—patterns and shapes which, by means of a kind of symbolic code that addresses itself to the eye and the intellect, are supposed to catch emotions but are “too weak to convey anything” (I 67).²⁷ On the other hand, abstract expressionism is simply “thrown-about paint”: while action painting turns its back on representation by turning to a world of manual forces and rhythm, it remains too “chancy” to participate in the disciplined formation of new forms that is supposed to *ensue* from the application of free marks and corresponding disruption of illustrative clichés (I 106).

Bacon's complex relation to the history of the visual arts, as well as to the problematic conditions informing the medium more generally (embracing perceptual, aesthetic and metaphysical considerations), converge in what Deleuze calls Bacon's “colourism”—aspects of which he inherits from modern colourists such as Cézanne and Van Gogh, but also pre-modern painters such as Velásquez and Rembrandt, both of whom Bacon greatly admired. More particularly, it is argued here, Bacon's art “makes sense” (in the passive and active senses of phrase) as an expression of force, sensation and the formation of form, because of the way his particular modulation of colour both resolves painting's problematic conditions and shows up as meaningful in relation to previously established solutions to these same problematic conditions (“to be a painter now ... you have to know ... the history of art from prehistoric times right up to today”).

How does Bacon's treatment of colour and colour relations resolve painting's problematic conditions? Deleuze defines as “colourists” those who

substitute relations of tonality [i.e., hue] for relations of value [i.e., light and dark], and who “render” not only the form, but also shadow and light, and time, through these pure relations of colour ... “Colourism” means not only that relations are established between colours (as in every painting worthy of this name), but that colour itself is discovered to be the variable relation, the differential relation, on which everything else depends. The formula of the colourist is: if you push colour to its pure internal relations (hot-cold, expansion-contraction), then you have everything ... form and ground, light and shadow, bright and dark (FB 139).

In Bacon’s colourism, then, it is the differential play of colour between the bright or pure tones of the background, the “broken tones” of the figure and the “communicating” colours of the autonomous contours, that is responsible for the aesthetic individuation of form, and that “explains the unity of the whole, the distribution of each element, and the way each of them acts upon the others” (FB 145). Moreover, the emergence and continued communication of the figure in relation to the ground in immediate sense perception is due to an Egyptian-like “haptic vision” that Bacon revives through his modulation of colour. Here, the feeling we have for space and the volumes of the figures are created through the juxtaposition of tones arranged gradually over the flat surface of the canvas, as opposed to such spaces and spatial relations being “illustrated” according to formulae that are verified by the judging eye and measured against optical forms in external space (such as in the use of foreshortening or modelling in chiaroscuro to create the illusion of depth) (FB 133–4). In other words, it is the sense of touch inhabiting one’s vision, as opposed to intellectual judgement, that immediately apprehends the spatialising effects of colour relations in Bacon’s images (warm and cool, expansion and contraction, etc.).

It can be difficult, however, to apprehend a painting in this haptic manner, given the tendency of illustrative clichés to impose themselves on what we see. One tends not to grasp the coloured form-ing of a form in a gradual, haptic fashion; one rather tends to see only finished forms through the lens of our expectations

(to which they conform, or which they confound). This is why Deleuze argues that the haptic vision elicited by Bacon's use of colour is made possible only by a new type of manual intrusion—a new relation between hand and eye—in the act of painting itself (FB 137-8). As noted above, Bacon's canvases include visible areas of "blurriness" arising from flicked paint, scrubbing and the like, without foresight or control. For the painter, these visible, chancy acts wrest colours and colour relations from the control exercised by optical clichés and present—as in a "graph" (Bacon) or "diagram" (Deleuze)—various possibilities for the production of new, non-illustrational forms: forms that emerge through the progressive and experimental modulation of the liberated colour relations. Importantly, however, Bacon's novel forms do not efface the diagram from which they spring. The diagram remains an integral part of the image and imposes itself on the eye in a way that works against the grain of optical clichés. It draws the eye towards the canvas, awakens the sense of touch within vision and constrains sight to traverse the tactile surface of the image and grasp the emergence of a form through the modulation of colour relations in a haptic fashion. It is this haptic art, of course, that Bacon believes comes across "directly onto the nervous system," as opposed to communicating a story "in a long diatribe through the brain" by means of illustrative clichés.

Bacon's experimental haptic colourism is thus his solution to several of painting's problematic conditions, including the relation between hand and eye in both visual perception and the act of painting, as well as the relation between figure, ground, immediate sense perception and intellectual judgement in the aesthetic individuation of forms. It is this solution that allows us to see his canvases as something more than a two-dimensional coloured surface: it is what allows us to grasp a novel form. But now, what is it that makes the coloured emergence of form in Bacon's paintings a painting of sensation, their conditioning forces, and the formation of form? There seems to be a difference between a painting being an example of the production of a form by means of colour relations—indeed, even classical representational paintings would count as such—and that painting

thereby giving expression to (making manifest while also actualising) the reality of force relations responsible for the formation of forms in experience. Indeed, it seems entirely possible that a child could haphazardly apply colour to canvas in such a way as to awaken a viewer's haptic vision and make a strange figure emerge from a ground, but I think we would be reluctant to say that the production of such a form simultaneously makes manifest the metaphysics of forces it presupposes. For Bacon, we can recall, because the instinctive art of children is not rooted in "cultivation and practice and knowledge," it will ultimately be "unsatisfactory" (I 112). Arguably, then, a painting's expressive capacities depend, at least in part, on the particular manner in which the painting inherits and/or transforms the historical and encultured norms of the medium. In what follows, then, I will indicate how the expressed of Bacon's paintings is made manifest through a comparison and contrast with several moments in the history of the visual arts—moments which involve both particular approaches to the aesthetic individuation of form, and various metaphysical ideas to which these approaches give expression.

We have already seen how, as Deleuze puts it, "a new Egypt rises up" in Bacon's resuscitation of the haptic—one whose shallow depth and tactile surface is "composed uniquely of colour and by colour" (FB 134). However, the differences between the coloured formation of form in Bacon's work as it passes through the chancy "diagram," and Egyptian bas-relief's strong, geometrical delineation of a material essence immune from change and becoming, communicates something about what is essential in Bacon's work. In other words, by contrast with an Egyptian artform with which it nevertheless seems to share several features, the visible elaboration of the accident in the formation of Bacon's forms is what "shows up" as the only constant—the only thing that endures.

The accident, as noted above, was also the object of classical representational painting: the mutable, organic body in space, apprehended at a given moment and from a contingent point of view, and modelled by the optical play of light and shadow. With this focus on the accident, the geometric contour that once delineated a material essence and functioned as the common limit of figure and

ground on a single plane, becomes the organic contour or outline of the figure in the foreground of perspectival space. Bacon's contour, by contrast, is not the contour of the figure but an autonomous element of the image: the cube, pipe, rug, bed, etc. He claimed he used this device in order to "concentrate the image down ... [and] see it better" (I 23). Deleuze interprets such remarks through the lens of Bacon's haptic colourism, arguing that the contour acts as a kind of "membrane," itself constituted by colour relations, that ensures a double movement between the other two regimes of colour: a flat extension towards the monochromatic field (with its pure tones) and a voluminous contraction towards the body or figure (characterised by broken tones) (FB 120, 151–2). The "shallow" depth thereby established between foreground and background in Bacon's paintings thus stands opposed to the naturalistic and perspectival optical space of classical representation, and in doing so it manifests, in conjunction with the Bacon's use of the diagram, a second break with the essential: not only the immutable essence of the material body, but also the supposed essence of the human being, to whose everyday outlook and organising powers the accident had been subjected in the elaboration and perfection of an optical form. For Bacon, there are only accidents, "all the way down"—contingent encounters between corporeal forces, sensation, the ongoing formation of form and the mutual transformation of the apprehending subject and apprehended object.

Aspects of Byzantine and Gothic art, as we have noted, are also echoed in Bacon's art. The differences between them, moreover, help us understand the different metaphysical concerns expressed in them. The large, monochromatic backgrounds in Bacon's paintings share an affinity with the luminous backgrounds of Byzantine mosaics, and both artforms engender spatiality through the use of colour. As Deleuze argues, however, Byzantine art treats colour and the production of space by means of value relations (the optical play of light and dark colours) as opposed to tonal relations (the haptic modulation of hot and cold, or expanding and contracting colours). The treatment of light and relations of value in Byzantine art, as analysed above, cause an optical form to emerge out of the background

without the need for tactile referents, while at the same time drawing the viewer into a luminous, spiritual realm that transcends corporeal existence. As Deleuze puts it, the image here is not so much the appearance of the essential, “it is rather the apparition itself that creates essence and law: things rise up and ascend into the light” (FB 128). Bacon’s haptic treatment of colour in terms of tonal relations, by contrast, implicates the viewer in what we might call a *transdescendence*. If there is an overcoming of the mundane in Bacon, the first step in this movement is in the direction of the manual forces and accidental encounters upon which the world of constituted forms depends.

Finally, spiritual transcendence was also a concern of Gothic ornament. As has already been argued, the manual linear fantasies of Gothic ornament, like Bacon’s diagrams, deform illustration and present new possibilities for figural becomings. Moreover, both artforms share the aim of breaking free of the mundane. Gothic ornament, however, implicates the viewer in an intense, sublime experience that transcends the earthly but without harnessing these forces in the constitution of new forms. In this sense, Gothic ornament can be likened to abstract expressionism in their shared difference to Bacon’s art: while all three involve a chancy manual deformation and give rise to sensation, the former remain irredeemably “confused” and fail to actualise their diagrammatic potentialities in bringing about the new (FB 109).

We see, then, through the lens of both his experimental, haptic colourism and his particular relation to various developments in the history of his medium, that the metaphysical reality that is manifested and actualised in Bacon’s paintings is one of manual forces whose accidental encounters and subsequent experimental elaborations give rise to the formation of new forms in and of experience. In other words, we see how, by means of the chancy distortions and subsequent modulations of his coloured images, Bacon re-problematizes and re-solves the various perceptual, aesthetic and metaphysical considerations that have informed the visual arts throughout their history, and thereby causes his images to actively and passively “make sense” within that medium as expressions of sensation,

corporeal forces and the formation of form.

THE ACT OF PAINTING

But now, the final question to be answered is how we should conceptualise the type of intentional activity and agency that is involved in Bacon's practice of painting. It seems to present a problem case for the so-called "standard" or "causal theory" of action. According to the standard theory that has developed out of the work of Donald Davidson, an event is an action, as opposed to something that merely happens, if it has the right kind of causal history. More specifically, the standard theory posits the existence of mental states (belief-desire pairs, intentions, etc.) that (i) represent the conditions of satisfaction or success that the performance of an action must realise, and (ii) cause that action to be carried out in the manner specified by that representational content.²⁸ As John Searle puts it, intentions have a world to mind direction of fit, and a mind to world direction of causation: they cause what they represent to be realised in the world.²⁹ And this entails, of course, that the representational content of the relevant mental state must be specified *in advance* of the action it causes.

As we have seen, however, Bacon claims that he cannot represent to himself *what* he wants to paint prior to the act of painting. Of course, he might be able to specify *some* conditions of satisfaction that his painting would need to meet, but these would be so vague as to be incapable of guiding or controlling the realisation of a highly complex activity and a nuanced visual image. Bacon also claims that, in any case, whatever he wants to paint, he cannot represent to himself *how* to paint it prior to discovering or inventing a way. The "how" question here, of course, concerns the non-illustrational construction that will be required to actualise the vague sensation Bacon has of some person or image and their "energy", and not various trivial means to his end such as moving his hand up and down or side to side, which he clearly knows will be involved. Of course, Bacon's head is filled with representations of various kinds—of images from life and the history of visual culture that he already knows how to illustrate using conventional visual signs—

but none of these will serve as the prior conditions of satisfaction for the image of “ambiguous” reality he wants to make manifest and actualise. As Bacon pithily puts it, painting “will only catch the mystery of reality if the painter doesn’t know how to do it” (I 116).

It might be objected that the standard theory now tends to distinguish between prior or “distal” intentions and present-directed intentions or intentions-in-action. Searle holds, for example, that all intentional actions are caused and guided by an intention-in-action that is *contemporaneous* with the action itself, and that represents (or “presents”) the action’s conditions of satisfaction “on the fly.” The conditions of satisfaction specified by an intention-in-action are concerned with the local details of the bodily movements or states of the agent in the unfolding performance of their action, and reference to it helps to explain an agent’s ongoing control over their activity. An intention-in-action is often “triggered” by a prior intention, whose conditions of satisfaction represent more general or global goals and means. But Searle also holds that, while all intentional actions require an intention-in-action for their situated performance, many of our spontaneous everyday actions do not require *prior* intentions.³⁰ We can, however, question whether this last claim is true, and for two reasons. First, presuming Searle is operating with a linear notion of cause, if an intention-in-action is indeed the cause of a bodily movement or state that is its effect, it must temporally and logically precede that effect—it is not strictly contemporaneous with the unfolding action, even if the temporal distance separating them is small. Secondly, when we reflect on the phenomenology of our agency, while we certainly don’t plan out in advance the minutiae of our purposeful behaviour, we typically experience very few if any cases of completely spontaneous action that are altogether unrelated to our prior projects, dispositions, or, more generally, “what we are about.” Indeed, it would be difficult for us to recognise completely spontaneous actions as ours, or to feel that we were the author of them. Intentions-in-action, it would seem, must either involve or be integrated with prior information relevant to the unfolding action, as opposed to being simply concerned with, and strictly contemporaneous to, local

conditions of bodily movement.

In a more recent development of the causal and representational theory of action, Elizabeth Pacherie has developed a three-tiered, dynamic model of intentions and action specification and control.³¹ She distinguishes between distal or D-intentions (Searle's "prior" intentions), proximate or P-intentions (intentions-in-action), and motor or M-intentions, and models the dynamic, causal exchanges between them as they mutually constrain and inform one another. Importantly, on Pacherie's model, information from the world that the agent's action is transforming is also fed back into this system via "comparators"—mechanisms that compare the initial representations specified at a given level of intentionality with the actual states of affairs that are being brought about under the guidance and control of these representations. The error signals produced when the representation and the result fail to coincide, of course, contribute to the progressive specification or refinement of the agent's intention at various levels. In this way, then, the specification of the conditions of satisfaction constitutive of an agent's intentions occurs in a dynamic way up and down the various tiers, such that, for example, not only would D-intentions cause and constrain the specification of relevant P-intentions, but the lack of fit between the agent's P-intention and the effects produced by its execution in the situation of action might demand the refinement of the agent's D-intention. While Pacherie briefly contemplates the existence of spontaneous or routine actions that do not require the presence of distal intentions, we should not think that for her intentional action can be devoid of some kind of prior intentionality at one level or another.³² Moreover, the kind of non-linear causality that informs her modelling, along with the way she integrates the "intentional cascade" with other cognitive systems, would allow her to address the second objection I raised to Searle's treatment of intentions-in-action. What this means, for the purposes of the present argument, is that Pacherie's work at first glance appears capable of accounting for the dynamic processes underpinning the progressive specification of Bacon's artistic intentions—commencing with the "break" that a more or less chancy motor act establishes with prior illustrative

representations, and gradually, by means of feedback loops and the intentional cascade, leading to the kind of full-blooded artistic intention that Bacon comes to discover through the execution of his work and that we would ordinarily want to attribute to him to explain his agency.

Bacon, in fact, seems to affirm several elements of such an account of action and agency in his interviews. Consider the following exchange, which we will need to unpack:

DS Now, it's clear that in any art there's a mixture of intention and what takes the artist by surprise.

FB Yes. Without the intention, he's not going to start at all.

DS What you seem to say is that in your own case surprise takes over from intention quite early on.

FB You see, one has an intention, but what really happens comes about in working ... And the way it works is really by the things that happen. In working you are really following this kind of cloud of sensation in yourself, but you don't know what it really is. And it's called instinct. And one's instinct, whether right or wrong, fixes on certain things that have happened in that activity of applying the paint to the canvas. I think an awful lot of creation is made out of ... the self-criticism of an artist ...

DS And in the application of his critical sense, he has no defined criteria; it's a purely instinctive kind of criticism. Is that what you mean?

FB I do mean that; yes. And he will never know whether he was right or wrong to leave [this or that mark on the canvas], because, after all, it takes too long really to know whether things are any good or not (I 168–9).

We can note several things here, reading this exchange in light of our earlier analyses. First, the intention that Bacon claims he starts with is neither the high-level decision to apply random marks to his canvas, nor the motor intentionality guiding such application. It is rather a complex intention embracing three elements: (i) an intention to give visual expression to something whose image he can represent to himself only in exceedingly vague terms; (ii) representations, informed by a deep appreciation of his medium, as to how such an image could be squeezed into an illustrational form; (iii) an intention to bring the image about in a way that is adequate to the “ambiguous” nature of the reality to be captured, and so in a way that will avoid illustrational clichés. Taken together, these conditions of satisfaction or criteria of success clearly do not amount to a clear and adequately specified representation of *what* is to be painted and *how*.

Secondly, Bacon will apply random marks to his canvas such that “surprise takes over from intention quite early on.” There is obviously some type of decision to lash out at the canvas, and motor intentionality is certainly involved here in the appropriate gripping of the brush or rag and the movement towards or over the canvas, but the act itself is supposed to be devoid of higher-level foresight or control. “Free marks” are thus made and “surprise takes over” from the initial vague intention, by which Bacon appears to mean, as noted above, that the tendency to illustrate the form he is seeking has been stymied and he can now stand back and survey the canvas like a “graph” of various novel possibilities for the formation of a form (I 62–5). But now, how do the aesthetic effects produced by the free marks feed back into the system in such a way as to contribute to the progressive specification the artistic intention that will be realised in the work? We should not consider the contemplation of possibilities to function in the same way as the “error signals” in the feedback loops of Pacherie’s model, that contribute to the refinement or ongoing specification of the agent’s higher-order intention. Indeed, the initial intention is not sufficiently well specified to function as a point of comparison vis-à-vis the actual state of affairs on the canvas. Nothing has gone wrong, but something certainly has happened that can be worked upon.

Third, Bacon claims that his artistic intention—that is, the intention that animates “what really happens” in his practice—“comes about in the working.” In other words, Bacon must discover what he is trying to paint and how through a process of experimentation and invention that he hopes will culminate in a non-illustrational construction capable of giving his initially indeterminate sensation the clarity of a form. He works, so he claims, in a “cloud of sensation,” progressively fixing on things that happen on the canvas as constitutive elements of the form that will have been produced, and so gradually specifying the conditions of satisfaction that the final form will have met.

Fourth, however, Bacon claims that there are no pre-defined criteria informing his decision to fix on one thing or another. Perhaps the only criterion is that the marks made should be non-illustrational, but clearly not all non-illustrational marks will be selected for the final form. Perhaps it will be suggested that there are determinate prior criteria or representations informing the selections made, but these are “unconscious,” and an explanation that refers to these unconscious representations or intentions best translates Bacon’s talk of working in a “cloud of sensation” or from “instinct.”

Two considerations work against such a reading. First, Bacon claims that “the moment you know what to do, you’re making just another form of illustration” (I 67). Presumably, “knowing” here could cover both unconscious and conscious knowledge. Bacon clearly has an expert’s understanding of his medium, which would allow him to judge what is “illustrationally appropriate” without bringing the painterly norms informing such judgements to the level of explicit, conscious reflection. In other words, we could very well accept the claim that Bacon possesses unconscious knowledge—representations or criteria—regarding how to construct painterly forms. However, these are precisely the criteria that he is trying to overcome in his experimental practice “out there” in the world. It might be objected that this argument does not rule out the possibility that Bacon still possesses another, different set of unconscious norms, criteria or representations regarding what is appropriate in *his* artistic practice, and that this guides the

selections he comes to make. But how these unconscious entities come about prior to the practice that would establish them remains rather mysterious.

The second consideration working against the idea that Bacon possesses prior, unconscious representations that guide his activity is this: if an unconscious representation can be satisfied by something the agent brings about in the world, even if the content of that representation was not available to the agent prior to its realisation, we should still expect the moment of satisfaction to have some kind of experiential effect on the agent, such that, for example, the agent comes to see what they were after all along, or experiences an easing of psychological tension, etc. However, Bacon's interviews suggest that he never reaches such a point. He claims, for example, that he tends to "destroy all the better paintings." He cannot have done with them and continues to apply paint to canvas until "there's too much paint on it—just a technical thing, too much paint, and one just can't go on" (I 17–8). He then agrees with Sylvester that "if people didn't come and take them away from you, nothing would ever leave the studio; you'd go on till you'd destroy them all" (I 20). In short, Bacon tends to destroy the paintings that are "working" or that seem "on the way" to success, which strongly suggests the absence of pre-existing but unconscious conditions of satisfaction that he might subsequently realise. It appears, then, that whatever intentionality animates Bacon's painterly practice comes about "in the working," and for as long as that work can continue.

Bacon's challenge to the standard story of action is thus this: he presents us with a case of purposeful activity for which we cannot assign, as its prior cause, an appropriately specified set of represented conditions of satisfaction. Rather, Bacon gradually works out what he is trying to paint and how to paint it through the temporally extended and situated activity itself, without necessarily achieving a determinate intention that represents in sufficient detail what is to be realised in the world. As he puts it, "the excitement and the possibilities are in the working and obviously *can only come in working*" (I 177, emphasis added). This is not to say that this "activity" or "working out" involves no representations, or that it is not animated by a cause. It is rather to say, on the one hand, that the artistic intention

that animates Bacon's activity is a type of "immanent" or non-linear cause that remains inseparable from the effects produced by that activity. And on the other hand, it is to say that the specification of significant aspects of the action-guiding, representational content of the intention is an effect of, rather than precedes, the temporally extended activity.

How, then, might the philosophy of action meet the challenge of such an action case? An "expressivist" approach to action and agency, drawing on the notion of expression as analysed above, could prove fruitful. Let us recall the four features of expressive relations, treating the action as the expression and the intention as what is expressed in the action-expression.

1. *Ontological feature*: The expressed intention is ontologically inseparable from its expression in action—it exists *in* the temporally extended and situated action it animates, although it is not identical with that action. What is intended is not simply whatever happens. After all, if illustrational elements start to emerge on the canvas, and/or if Bacon cannot go on because the canvas becomes too clogged with paint, we would not want to say that he intended just this. As noted above, Bacon does hold a "vague" or under-specified intention that can fail to be realised in such situations. On the one hand, however, on the view presented here, what it is to *have* even a vague intention *is* to be acting on it. In other words, following Taylor, Ferrero, and others, there are no Davidsonian "pure intendings" that could exist apart from intentional actions; there are, at most, intentions that impose only very weak or general constraints on an agent's current activity.³³ On the other hand, given the continuity between intending and acting, it will be *in* the temporally extended and situated performance of the action, and for as long as it lasts, that the initially vague intention becomes progressively specified or concretely actualized.

2. *Epistemological feature:* The action-expression communicates something about the expressed intention by virtue of the way that the intentional action “makes sense” (in both the passive and active senses of this phrase) within an expressive medium. We examined Bacon’s relation to the complex expressive medium of painting at length in the previous section. The claim now is that what Bacon wants to paint and how it is to be painted—his artistic intention—is something that is progressively made manifest and specified through his unfolding activity such as it “shows up” in the expressive medium of painting, where Bacon’s experimental painterly practice “makes sense” in relation to the background norms of his medium that his activity simultaneously reshapes.
3. *Causal feature:* As has just been argued, the expressed intention should be considered as the immanent cause of the action, which is to say, a type of non-linear cause that is informed by the effects it produces over time.
4. *Productive feature:* Finally, it follows from the above that the expressed intention is not something that is fully formed prior to its expression in a temporally extended and situated action. The action, unfolding in its medium, does something—it is a kind of dynamic “actualising” and specification of the expressed intention.

It is beyond the scope of the present essay to give a full account and defence of the expressive conception of action and agency. Our purpose here is rather to show that a study of Bacon’s artistic practice both problematises the standard theory of action and motivates a turn to the expressive conception—the details of which have been, and continue to be, developed elsewhere in the literature.³⁴ After all, it is one thing to elaborate a compelling problem case that the standard theory of action has trouble explaining, and another to show that a different theory that

explains the problem case can also explain the cases of action typically treated by the standard theory.

To round out the present study, I will say a few words to bring together the two moments of expression analysed above: the expression in Bacon's paintings of force, sensation and the formation of form, and the expression in Bacon's practice of painting of his artistic intentions. Both moments, it can be argued, involve a manifestation and actualisation of force, sensation and the formation of new forms in and of experience. As noted above, not only is the real subject of Bacon's paintings the energetic reality responsible for the formation of novel forms, Bacon paints this reality "from within." Bacon's images, as well as his practice of painting, participate in energetic reality by giving active expression to it—making manifest the potentialities for transformation inherent in that reality and actualising them in novel ways, at the moving border between the apprehending subject and what this subject is capable of apprehending, in the world and about themselves.

On the one hand, we have seen how Bacon's experimental colourism involves an application of force both to his canvases (through the manual diagram) and to the medium whose norms he problematises through his actions. We have seen how his haptic colourist approach and use of the diagram re-problematises and resolves the various perceptual, aesthetic and metaphysical considerations that have informed the history of the visual arts (as well as our ordinary ways of seeing), and thereby causes his images to actively and passively "make sense" within that medium as expressions of sensation, corporeal forces and the formation of form. The progressive modulation of colour from out of Bacon's chancy manual interventions awakens the sense of touch within vision and constrains sight to traverse the tactile surface of the image and grasp the emergence of the form—the body, or ostensible subject of his painting, sustaining a sensation—in a haptic fashion.

On the other hand, not only do Bacon's paintings give expression to the reality of a body sustaining a sensation and forming itself in experience under the influence of

corporeal forces, Bacon as a painter is sustaining a complex sensation as well. He is struck, as it were, by the ostensible subject matter of the painting (a person, for example, to whose “pulsations” conventional ways of painting fail to do justice); but he is also struck by the surprising diagram and coloured experiment unfolding on the canvas. These two, forceful encounters problematise the illustrational clichés Bacon has inherited and call, not only for the formation of a new form that would be adequate to the energetic and processual reality to be painted, but also for the progressive specification of a new artistic goals and means—new conditions of satisfaction for a painterly act.

I conclude by clarifying these claims through an example. Let us return to *Figure at a Washbasin* (1976), whose particular colour relations were analysed above. The image arguably represents Bacon’s lover, George Dyer, attempting to regurgitate the alcohol and drugs that would soon take his life. Following the argument developed here, the painting is not simply a depiction of Dyer at a given moment, nor is it a painterly representation of Bacon’s feelings of grief and loss associated with the death of his lover. Rather, above all, the painting is an expression—achieved through the modulation of colour and colour relations – of sensation, force and the formation of form. On the one hand, there is the body of Dyer (the ostensible subject of the painting) which “sustains a sensation” under the impetus of forces (the real subject of the painting, here manifested as the visible corporeal “spasm” that results from the encounter between the invisible conative force of Dyer’s life, as it were, and the invisible force exercised by the consumed narcotics). But on the other hand, and inseparably, there is Bacon’s own experience as he progressively makes manifest and clarifies in an emergent form the vague sensation elicited by a conjunction of two encounters: the way Bacon is “struck” by an image of Dyer’s body under the influence of other forces—an image that is beyond the capacity of illustrational clichés to render; and the way Bacon, immersed in but also struggling against the norms of his chosen medium, is “struck” by the coloured experiment progressively unfolding on the canvas from out of the interruptive diagram. Bacon’s painting, as well as the artistic intention

animating its production, is in all these respects the rendering visible—that is, the expression, or manifestation and actualization—of troubling, invisible and sub-representational forces in a novel, emergent form.

SEAN BOWDEN is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Deakin University, researching primarily in the area of contemporary French philosophy and the philosophy of action and agency.

NOTES

1. See especially John Russell, *Francis Bacon*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1993; and Andrew Sinclair, *Francis Bacon: His Life and Violent Times*. New York: Crown, 1993.
2. See David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2016, 53. Henceforth, this work will be referenced in the body of the text as “I” followed by the page number(s).
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. London and New York: Continuum, 2003. Henceforth, this work will be referenced in the body of the text as “FB” followed by the page number(s).
4. This “body” that, at the limit, is both subject and object is what Deleuze calls a “body without organs,” which is a differential field of forces. We examine this notion further below.
5. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. London: Athlone Press, 1994, 143.
6. See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139–41, 143–6.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. D. A. Landes. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.
8. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938.
9. Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature.” *Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press 1985, 215–47.
10. Charles Taylor, “Action as Expression.” *Intention and Intentionality: Essays in Honour of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Eds Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichmann. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, 73–89.
11. Elizabeth S. Anderson and Richard H. Pildes, “Expressive Theories of Law: A General Restatement.” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 148:5 (2000, 1503–75).
12. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Zone Books, 1990.
13. Bacon discusses this technique in his interviews: “I throw an awful lot of paint onto things, and I don’t know what is going to happen to it ... I throw it with my hand. I just squeeze it into my hand and throw it on ... I use anything. I use scrubbing brushes and sweeping brushes and any of those things that I think painters have used ... I impregnate rags with colour, and they leave this kinds of network of colour across the image. I use them nearly always” (I 104–5).
14. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*. Eds Leonard Lawlor and Ted Toadvine. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007.
15. See Ronald Bogue, “Colour.” *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003, 137–8.
16. See generally, Bogue, “Colour”, 131–60.
17. E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art, 16th Edition*. London: Phaidon, 1995, 44.
18. See Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 55–62.
19. Bogue, “Colour”, 147.
20. Wilhelm Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*. New York: G. E. Stechert & Co., 1920, 38.
21. See also on this Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. Trans. M. D. Hottinger. New York: Dover Publications, 1950, 21.
22. Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 136–8.
23. See Bogue, “Colour”, 143–4.
24. See generally, Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, 45–51.
25. Bogue, “Colour”, 149–50.
26. Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, 50–51. See also Gombrich’s discussion of Gothic

architecture in *The Story of Art*, 185–9.

27. On the notion of a “symbolic code” employed in abstract painting, whose function is to open up a type of “spiritual state” capable of saving the human being “from external tumult and manual chaos”, but which tends to simply re-code illustrative clichés, see FB 103–4, 9.

28. The *loci classici* for this view are, of course, Donald Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons, and Causes.” *Journal of Philosophy* 60:23 (1963, 685–700), and Michael Bratman’s, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. The helpful vocabulary of conditions of “satisfaction” or “success” comes from John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

29. See John Searle, “The Intentionality of Intention and Action.” *Cognitive Science* 4 (1980, 62).

30. See Searle, *Intentionality* and “The Intentionality of Intention and Action.”

31. See Elizabeth Pacherie, “The Phenomenology of Action: A Conceptual Framework.” *Cognition* 107:1 (2008, 179–217).

32. Pacherie, “The Phenomenology of Action”, 189.

33. See Taylor, “Action as Expression”, 86–7; Luca Ferrero, “Intending, acting and doing.” *Philosophical Explorations* 20:S2 (2017, 25–6). On the notion of pure intentions, see Donald Davidson, “Intending.” *Philosophy of History and Action*. Eds Yirmiakou Yovel and D. Reidel, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1978, 41–60.

34. See, for example, Taylor, “Action as Expression”; Charles Taylor, “Hegel and the Philosophy of Action.” *Hegel’s Philosophy of Action*. Eds L. S. Stepelevich and D. Lamb, Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1983, 1–18; Aaron Ridley, *The Deed is Everything: Nietzsche on Will and Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; and Sean Bowden, “Assembling Agency: Expression, Action and Ethics in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 58:3 (2020, 383–400).