

# DELEUZE AND THE FORCE OF COLOR

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In his 1984 introduction to the English edition of *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze emphasizes Bacon's "genius as a colorist" and offers the following analysis of color in Bacon's works: "It is as though painting were able to conquer time in two ways, through color: as eternity and light in the infinity of a field . . . and . . . as passage, as metabolic variability in the enactment of . . . bodies, in their flesh and on their skin."<sup>1</sup> Deleuze proposes an intimate connection between color and time, challenging the predominant association of color (and of painting itself) with space, and following in the steps of Bergson as he argues for unique, nonlinear ways in which time *endures*. The competing temporal dimensions of color in Bacon's work allow his paintings to register at variable intensities and speeds: fast and slow passages of paint disrupt one's attempt to *read* his imagery or to identify his paintings in a glance. Describing the effect of Bacon's color and its dynamic variability, Deleuze invokes "a violence that is involved only with color and line: the violence of sensation."<sup>2</sup> Bacon's paintings epitomize a coincidence of color, time, sensation, and violence critical to Deleuze's concept of what it means to be a living body. Simultaneously, they underscore an eerie yet vivifying ambiguity between life and art—flesh and paint.

This essay investigates the relationship Deleuze establishes between sensation and color in Bacon's work, proceeding in three steps: first, an exploration of the meaning of the term "sensation" as Deleuze employs it; then, a consideration of sensation in the context of Bacon's paintings; and finally, an argument for how Bacon's color elicits sensation. Deleuze's text is a resource for philosophically engaging Bacon's paintings—and painting more broadly—but it is also a critical contribution to increasingly sensitive notions of embodiment and subtle theories of color. Deleuze argues that bodies are intimately related and receptive to the force of color—and particularly to color's destabilization of coherent tem-

porality.<sup>3</sup> The complexities of color provide an entry point for encountering the complexity of myriad bodies, giving us new ways of thinking about bodies and additional reasons to let artworks and other strange or foreign bodies impact and guide philosophical reflection. Acknowledging the relationship between what it means to be a sensitive body and what it means to be subjected to the ambiguities of color is crucial for understanding Deleuze's focus on painting, his fixation on Bacon in particular, and his idiosyncratic concept of sensation.

## Sensation and "Nonhuman Becoming"

Philosophers have long lamented sensory perception and the aging body as transient and prone to error, arguing that one might attain something more eternal, unchanging, and true by surmounting the body and focusing on the intellect or mind. In this tradition, bodily sensation signifies an immature, pre-rational aspect of existence that human beings share with animals and children. It is as if one is at the mercy of one's body, confined by the fact of embodiment like Plato's prisoner bound in her dark cave. One mark of twentieth-century philosophy, particularly of feminist philosophies and phenomenology, is a critique of such reductive notions of sensation and embodiment and an embrace of ambiguity, variability, and change. Merleau-Ponty famously introduced the term "flesh" into his philosophy and gave central importance to a body's unique ability to touch and be touched. In the process, he and others opened the way to thinking about the dignity of the visceral, sensitized body and the possibility of relating to the world and each other in more intimate ways—not only through the dispassionate light of reason and rationality.

Deleuze follows the contemporary impulse to re-dignify and complicate the body. His emphasis, however, is not on any paradigmatic receptive possibility—not on touching (as with Merleau-Ponty) or hearing (as with Levinas). Instead, Deleuze thinks about bodies in terms

of complex vitalities subject to patterns and rhythms that defy any stable or coherent identification. The bodies Deleuze investigates are radically trans-figurable and resistant to description. Broadening the parameters of embodiment, he suggests that a body might be a place (a desert, an island, or a city), a single-celled organism (an amoeba), a work of art, an animal, a plant, or a human being. These are all bodies insofar as they are all dynamic creatures with distinctive life cycles, intensities, and needs. Cities expand and contract, thrive and suffer. The amoeba, with its fully permeable membrane, responds instantaneously to minute changes in fluid concentration, temperature, and air. There are times when any body may be more or less city-like (dispersed, bustling, crowded) or amoeba-like (sensitized, reactive). Further, every body is itself inhabited by other bodies—microcosms within macrocosms.<sup>4</sup> This means that every body is a chaotic and hybrid multiplicity capable of distinctive choreography and organization, but also internally disruptive and related to multiple kinds of creatures and forces in an infinite number of ways. Deleuze asks us to think about the multiplicity of bodies and the way in which every body is itself inhabited by infinite zones of indeterminate embodiment. This significantly blurs the lines between types of organisms (or distinctive species) and forces us to think about different degrees and intensities of embodiment rather than radically separated or different kinds of bodies.

In Deleuze's picture of the multiple/indistinct body, sensation signifies the body prior to any distinction into sensing parts (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands) and before any differentiation from surrounding bodies. Rather than a particular sensation (a sense of heat or of cold, for example), Deleuze is concerned with the body's openness to impact at a pre-articulate, pre-organized level. A sensitive body is profoundly entwined or enmeshed in its environment—as if the borders of a body are radically permeable or, to use James's proto-phenomenological terminology from the *Principles of Psychology*, “infinitely fringed.”<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, though he calls himself an empiricist, is not concerned with atomic bits of sense impression as the classical empiricists were, but with the pluralistic de-articulation of the body—its reversion to a primal soup or to a

synaesthetic core of sensitivity. In this account, the sheer fact of sensation drags with it multiple senses—blurring the lines between distinct sensing capacities and showing that stimuli reverberate through bodies in multiple, unpredictable ways. Like Bergson before him, Deleuze diagnoses a human tendency to focus on the subsequent organization of stimuli, the impulse to articulate an inarticulate event. In the process of articulation, sensation transfigures into abstracted, carved up, and nameable pieces—symbols of sense. Just as Bergson argued that creative instinct gives way to static intellect in human beings, Deleuze argues that the transition from sensation toward *re*-presentation and articulation is an inevitable, but not irreparable, step. At first, things are ambiguous and un-nameable. Deleuze describes the pre-articulate level of sensation in terms of “invisible forces” and chaotic “vibrations.” The fact that we are sensible creatures means that we are profoundly co-extensive with forces traversing the natural world. This is why Deleuze continually references non-human animals (particularly birds with their rhythmic songs and patterns of flight) and certain kinds of landmasses and territories (deserts, islands). In each case, he is concerned with how bodies deform, deteriorate, de-materialize, or de-organize—reverting towards more ambiguous states that exhibit the “power of Nature.” This is a non-human (rather than inhuman) power which Deleuze explains as: the “non-organic life of things, a frightful life, which is oblivious to the wisdom and limits of the organism.... It is the vital as potent pre-organic germinality, common to the animate and the inanimate, to a matter which raises itself to the point of life, and to a life which spreads through all matter.”<sup>6</sup>

Given our tendency to abstract from sensation, Deleuze thinks we are prone to thinking and living in increasingly isolated, insensitive ways. Drawing ever more decisive boundaries around oneself, one's home, city, or country, one separates oneself from the environment and interconnection with other bodies. One becomes, thereby, at risk of losing touch with the pre-articulate, chaotic sensitivity that is distinctive to being a living body, at risk of becoming increasingly dead matter.

Deleuze continuously stresses creativity and art because art reintroduces bodies to ex-

periences of sensible chaos to which they may be resistant or increasingly immune. Describing art as “capturing forces,” he credits artworks with suspending forces in ways that allow us to encounter vital energy that would otherwise remain disperse. Deleuze also describes both art and sensation as “monuments” of indetermination—as if artworks are the houses or marginal structural containers for essentially illusive or explosive forces that have no other means of being presented. Art introduces something new into the world and can take one by surprise. When it does this, it figures as the dawning of a body that has yet to be named or specified—that doesn’t fit into any known category or scheme. “Life alone,” Deleuze insists, “creates . . . zones where living beings whirl around, and only art can reach and penetrate them in its enterprise of co-creation.”<sup>7</sup> Art can resonate with the primal sensitivity of bodies, affecting one in ways one cannot pre-determine or prepare for. In doing so, art reactivates the sensitive core of the body (its synaesthetic substrate), provoking new feelings and engendering deeper thresholds of vulnerability. This means that art can expand one’s experience of what it means to be embodied and what it means to sense. As something radically new and experimental in the world, art can make one anew. It can make one sensitive to things that can’t be codified, systematized or named—revealing a possibility for intelligence and intimacy that is not based on traditional epistemic foundations of understanding, recognition, judgment, or identification.

### A Very Ambiguous Precision<sup>8</sup>

Deleuze prioritizes art in all of his texts, but Francis Bacon is the sole artist to whom he devotes an entire, independent study. What does sensation have to do with Bacon’s paintings? On a first, very basic level, Bacon’s work deals with bodies—human bodies, but also animal bodies, bodies of water and land (particularly in his late imagery of geysers, lawns, and deserts), and the body (or *consistency*) of paint itself. This is a starting point for Deleuze as he considers the ways that Bacon handles bodies in paint—the unique way he treats bodies as zones of indeterminacy by scrubbing and smearing his colors to produce fleshy areas

without decisive borders or features. Bacon’s contorted and obscured bodies illustrate what Deleuze calls, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the “movements of deterritorialization.”<sup>9</sup> Bacon’s athletic, chaotic strokes, like the “movements” Deleuze describes, disrupt signification and stable structures of meaning. Oozing, seeping, or evaporating out of the canvas, Bacon’s bodies flee confinement and show what Deleuze calls the “very different natures and speeds” of multiple “inhumanities,” inhumanities that engender “strange new becomings, new polyvalencies.”<sup>10</sup>

*Speed* is a critical concept for Deleuze, and he turns to Bacon, in part, for his exploitation of the velocity of paint and his fascination with things in motion. Given Deleuze’s obsession with the difficulty of distinguishing one body from another, Bacon is a natural ally. Bacon’s work, however, also deals with an active refusal of the alternatives between representation and abstraction. In various interviews, Bacon talked openly about his dissatisfaction with the trends in painting in the 1950s and 60s. Abstract expressionism seemed too self-absorbed and frivolous—erring too far on the side of the sublime, the subjective, and the abstract. Op Art seemed overly sterile and geometric, divorced from the fluidity of paint and the feeling of life. Pop Art relied too heavily on outlines and textual, cartoon narratives—delivering cheap punch lines. Illustrative, narrative painting seemed doomed to produce poor copies. Bacon sought a way between abstraction and representation to create paintings that would engage the distinctive fluidity and force of paint but that would also harness that force into ambiguously discernible form.

Celebrating the idiosyncrasy of Bacon’s paintings, Deleuze emphasizes their suspension between figuration and abstraction. On one level, Bacon’s paintings seem figurative in their depiction of people, places, and things. In 1981 (when Deleuze’s text was first published) Bacon was wildly popular in France, but he was also the subject of significant criticism for painting figures at a time when painting had supposedly surmounted representation, narration, and the human form. Bacon’s obsession with flesh and all of the odd objects cluttering his paintings seemed to critics like nostalgic throwbacks, or, as Hilton Kramer remarked “stylish horrors.”<sup>11</sup> For such critics, the

subject matter of Bacon's paintings, coupled with the fact of painting (as opposed to performance, film, video or other new media), produced an unholy combination of the old and the ancient at a moment when the art world was obsessed with the new and the future.<sup>12</sup>

Despite their figurative aspects, Bacon's paintings look intensely abstract in their variable brushwork, their lack of horizons, and their treatment of figures as clumps of painterly meat. On this level, the parts of Bacon's paintings one might expect to crystallize into discernable form remain stubbornly indistinct. What appears as a benignly seated person at first glance disintegrates into a writhing mass of color upon closer examination. Rooms evaporate into ethereal color fields; objects thicken and run together like hot tar. For anyone concerned with identifying the content of Bacon's paintings, the abstract dimension of his paint frustrates definition. Mirroring the material nature of paint itself, his paintings remain inherently slippery and allergic to definition. Viewers of his work experience an uncanny sense of identification with "subjects"—a person, a dog, an umbrella—and a simultaneous inability to fully or coherently recognize anything.

Defying categorization as either representative or abstract, Bacon's paintings upset attempts to articulate a neat, chronological history of painting proceeding from representation to abstraction: from Classicism—with its focus on figures, inhabitable space, and discernable form, to Modernism—with its focus on dense marks, flatness, and deformation. Deleuze, following Bacon's lead, challenges any linear conception of the history of art and identifies Bacon with an ancient, Egyptian aesthetic that privileged color and relief over line and two-dimensional form. His love of Bacon reflects a love of the rogues and misfits who introduce variation and chaos into a supposedly closed system. Bacon doesn't fit into the picture of painting as a progressive graduation away from the human figure. Refusing to choose between figuration and abstraction, as if they were mutually exclusive, Bacon forges a third way—a detour.

Deleuze refuses the stark differentiation between human, animal and machine. Likewise, he refuses to accept the hard and fast distinction between figurative, representational

painting and a-figurative, abstract painting. Noting their similarity, rather than their difference, he explains, "the same criticism can be made of both figurative painting and abstract painting: they pass through the brain, they do not act directly on the nervous system, they do not attain the sensation."<sup>13</sup> Figurative painting engages the brain by registering as essentially narrative. Abstract painting engages the brain by registering as purely optical. Deleuze asks whether there is another possibility for painting. Might painting engage or grip a whole body, and if so, how?

Bacon's paintings necessitate whole-bodied engagement by forgoing any abstract/figurative alternative and challenging the false dichotomy between genres that are in fact two names for one cerebral phenomenon. The paintings do this in part by failing to fit traditional expectations and disclosing the inadequacy of readymade concepts. Jamming the gears of judgment, they place one in the presence of something foreign requiring a novel mode of interaction. Bacon dismantles static dualities and disintegrates stable identities, subjecting his viewers to experiences of complexity and indeterminacy by manipulating "organic form that relates to the human image but is a complete distortion of it."<sup>14</sup> Deleuze credits the paintings with rekindling a pre-organized, pre-judgmental immersion in a moving stream of experience.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as life itself is messy, ill defined, and unpredictable, Bacon's paintings look alive and occasion visceral reminders that the seemingly most banal things (a sink, a chair, a primary color) and the most elementary actions (walking, sitting, sneezing) are neither simple nor elementary.

Deleuze links the indeterminacy of Bacon's work with a feeling of being intensely present to something that exceeds the powers of thought. As a result of their essential ambiguity, Bacon's paintings provoke what Deleuze calls "the sensation." Sensation is always singular for Deleuze, signifying the chaotic unity of sense prior to the body's discernment of and organization into individual sensing parts. He identifies sensation with a micro-organic, pre-articulate level of impact on a creature he terms (following Artaud) "the body without organs."<sup>16</sup> The body without organs cannot be dissected into distinct pieces since it is comprised, like a sea, of infinite waves, interpen-



etrating “thresholds or levels.”<sup>17</sup> Sensation for such a body is therefore, not *a* sensation (a sensation of warmth, of cold, of hunger), which might be associated with discreetly felt reactions to specific stimuli. Instead, Deleuze’s notion of sensation entails a “direct action on the nervous system”<sup>18</sup>—a scrambling of the neural pathways emanating from or leading to the brain, short-circuiting a subject’s center of control and command. Describing sensation, Deleuze employs imagery of exposed nerves and invokes the clinical state of “Hysteria” to indicate overwhelming waves of emotion that intensify and reconfigure the thresholds of feeling and the temporal-spatial localization of the body. He references William Burroughs’ soupy, orifice-riddled bodies and Beckett’s insomniac paralytics. Painting, Deleuze explains, “gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs.”<sup>19</sup> It is as if paintings (particularly Bacon’s paintings) carry a “taboo” power like the one Freud described: something “dangerous, unclean and mysterious.”<sup>20</sup> Seductive and infectious, taboo objects are capable of transmitting their demonic magic to anyone who nears them, remaking bodies in their own image, propagating themselves like a cancer.

Painting has the potential to make a body fluid and painterly. Pooling into and out of itself, the body facing a painting intensifies into a dense, wet, eye. Deleuze argues that painting can turn bodies into “haptic” eyes, radically recasting vision and provoking a new sense of what it means to be *touched*.<sup>21</sup> Describing the tactile dimension of sight, he explains, “We will speak of the *haptic* whenever . . . sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function.”<sup>22</sup> Painting occasions a reversion to a primary indistinctness of sensation, as the organs of sense impression wander, blur, and bleed into one another. The activation of what Deleuze names “the hysterical reality of the body” derives from the collision of creative forces traversing bodies from within and without.<sup>23</sup> The act of painting requires a “feeling” eye and a “seeing” hand. In turn, viewing a painting can occasion a new possibility for vision, a way of seeing that feels indistinguishable from being touched. When haptic perception supersedes optical perception, the eye is no longer restricted to serving a single func-

tion. Bacon’s paintings—illegible and yet powerfully visible—force vision to operate devoid of its usual footholds. Confronted with his paintings, vision finds additional sensitivity, a deep reserve of untapped nerves.<sup>24</sup>

In the process of undermining the cerebral organization of a body, painting scrambles the distinction between activity and passivity and between the seer and the seen. A spectator facing the painting finds herself riveted and worked over by the painting, caught in its gaze. The eye does not capture painting; painting captures the eye in its sticky hold. Bacon’s paintings frustrate the cognitive effort to identify and name. This frustration is one consequence of the painting’s indeterminate suspension between the figural and the abstract. Sensation blocks and disarms rational thought, but it also occasions the emergent vitality of alternative means of engagement. In order to describe the positive consequence of vision’s optical disarmament, Deleuze must consider how and why Bacon’s work activates the eye’s haptic potential. That is, how does Bacon’s paint not only frustrate thought but occasion sensation?

### Color Forces

The most innovative and exceptional part of Deleuze’s analysis of Bacon is his treatment of Bacon as a “genius colorist” and his profound sensitivity to the material force of color.<sup>25</sup> Little has been written about color in Bacon’s work, and color itself has been largely relegated to the ornamental, inessential, and beautiful aspect of painting in the broader history of art. Deleuze withholds mention of color until the final chapters of his analysis. In his Preface, he offers a justification for the architecture of his text, explaining: “Each of the following rubrics considers one aspect of Bacon’s paintings, in an order that moves from the simplest to the most complex. . . . All of these aspects . . . converge in color, in the ‘coloring sensation,’ which is the summit of this logic.”<sup>26</sup> Contesting the tendency to categorize color as elementary, Deleuze identifies color as the most complex aspect of Bacon’s work. Color ultimately activates vision’s untapped, haptic, potential, transforming sight from a passive receptor of light to an active collaborator in a materially energized field.

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Deleuze argues that Bacon's paintings illicit sensation through "the color system."<sup>27</sup> Although Deleuze explains sensation in terms of the "Figure" (his term for the non-figurative yet non-abstract bodies peopling Bacon's work) and its immediate effect on the nervous system, he ultimately describes the "Figure" and its appeal to a pre-articulate unity of the senses in terms of color and its ability to infuse and transfigure a body's relationship to space and time. Bacon's colors, like his subject matter, evade description, radiating in powerful rivers of red, ocher, orange, and teal. "It is color," Deleuze insists, "and the relations between colors, that form this haptic world and haptic sense, in accordance with the relations of warm and cool, expansion and contraction."<sup>28</sup> Color spreads across multiple levels, establishing zones of intensity and generating temperature. The tangible feel of color leads Deleuze to associate color with the eye's paradigmatic vulnerability and the spatial possibility of impingement. Optic space, a scientific/Newtonian space in which color remains equivalent to light, gives way to haptic space when color takes on additional density, assuming a material, opaque presence. Deleuze describes this transition in terms of a new set of relations. Rather than relations based on value (lights or darks), in haptic space colors relate through tone (redness or greenness). This allows for a more nuanced and complicated set of relationships, as an infinite number of possibilities emerge across an ever-modulating spectrum. Presumably Bacon's masterful handling of oil paint (the medium both Rubens and de Kooning associated with flesh) has something to do with the force exerted on vision and the degree to which Bacon's paintings engorge the eye with their luminous color. In his analysis of Bacon as a colorist, Deleuze elevates color from an inessential "secondary quality" to a primary, unparalleled force (reversing the longstanding art-historical bias for line over color—Picasso over Matisse).

In Chapter Sixteen, Deleuze turns to color explicitly and catalogs three dominant ways color operates in Bacon's paintings and their corresponding effects.<sup>29</sup> The first function of color Deleuze identifies is the "color-structure." This concept refers to the wide, flat areas of pigment Bacon uses to divide his canvases, lending his compositions "a [chromatic] bone

structure."<sup>30</sup> Such colors are, from a distance, the dominant hue of any individual painting. The effect of color in these instances is to establish an "armature"—an arena, a stage, a tide, or an atmosphere—within or from which everything else emerges.<sup>31</sup> Bacon's "fields" determine the light of his paintings and take a cue from modernist color field painters. These vast areas of color are thinly painted, visibly drippy washes under-girding the picture like a cohesive fog. Deleuze sees in Bacon's color fields the "internal variations of intensity or saturation," which lend his pictures an "aerial" perspective and occasion a "temporal perception" of eternity.<sup>32</sup> Situated within a modulating field of vibrant color (often sherbet oranges and pinks), Bacon's figures glisten like organisms suspended in amber. By virtue of color's inherent modulation—its *inner* changing light—the vast areas of color constitute both a dis-placing *place* (infinitely high and deep space) and an a-historical *time* (the ambiguous, unending time of eternity). This is color employed as a desert or a sea—radiating out of the canvas as though emanating from an invisible and ancient source of light.

The lesson Deleuze derives from this first use of color is that even in these expanses (which appear uniform from afar) minute modulations of tone, intensity, luminosity, and saturation disallow the identification of a single, coherent color. One might name the field in a particular painting "orange" (for example), but one finds oranges ranging from yellow to blue within a given field. Such variation demonstrates the internal complexity of color and the tendency (inherent in and perpetuated by color names) to reduce the phenomenon of color to a static, articulate quality (a nameable hue) rather than experiencing color as an emergent, variable event. Bacon's fields of color are reminders that color is comprised of internal, contextual differences, which evaporate if reduced to a single, spatial pixel or point.<sup>33</sup>

The second use of color Deleuze considers is "color-force," and here he turns to Bacon's contorted figures and his handling of flesh. In these areas of his paintings, Bacon opts for thick, layered paint (applied with a palette knife rather than a wet brush) and "broken tones" (*tons rompus*).<sup>34</sup> If the vast color fields provoke a sense of eternity, the impasto, broken tones of the flesh produce a sense of vis-

ceral interruption—a broken time Deleuze identifies with “the chronochromatism of the body.”<sup>35</sup> Staccato beats of color produce the material force Deleuze reserves for the fleshy elements of Bacon’s paintings. On top of the eternity of color and within an infinitely high and deep space, Bacon superimposes the *instant* of color and establishes a claustrophobic space of proximity.<sup>36</sup> Such areas “render a force visible”<sup>37</sup>—the force of a sneeze, of gravity, of sitting or turning. Rather than zones of color ambiguously melding into one another at dithered edges, here colors fight against each other—meeting at ridges of different physical relief, establishing higher and lower planes. The lesson derived from Bacon’s color fields has to do with a sense for eternity and the nomadic truth of the non-identical, but the lesson of Bacon’s “color-force” concerns the experience of conflicting demands, the broken time of perpetual interruption, and the physical tension of densely populated space.

The third and final use of color Deleuze considers relates to the odd objects cluttering Bacon’s paintings: rugs, washbasins, umbrellas, and shadows, which Deleuze identifies with “color-contour.” While these areas seem (at first) to adhere to an ancient hierarchy of line over color (insofar as they appear as definitely outlined, articulated, colored *shapes*), Deleuze argues they are in fact shapes derived from color alone—pools radiating out to their own edge.<sup>38</sup> The ovals and rounded contours reflect the fluidity of paint, which flows amorphously, seeping into the canvas according to its own logic. Color in these cases establishes particular areas of focus or illumination that Deleuze compares to the “halos of premodern painting.”<sup>39</sup> Bacon handles objects and shadows in his paintings with more opacity than the color fields, but significantly less impasto than the figures. While the “color-structure” of the field creates distance and height, the “color-force” of the figure generates proximity, and the “color-contour” of the objects mediates between them. These are the passages of the paintings that allow a viewer to transition from field to flesh. The “halos” constitute the middle ground of Bacon’s paintings, places where the viewer’s eye might acclimate or marginally focus. The lesson learned from the color-contour involves compromise and passage. Color can modulate and vibrate as it does in the field,

it can fight, bend, and break as it does in the figures, and it can also mend, arbitrate, and flow as it does in the contour.

Shuttled between different uses of color: structure, force, and contour (coincident with different *applications* of pigment: the wide wet brush, the knife, the short thick brush), one’s eyes encounter different obstacles. Each area of color, ambiguous in its own way, lacks any definite outline and generates a novel kind of edge (a wet blur, a hard ridge, a pooled halo). Things recede or emerge as different areas of the painting capture the eye differently. If Bacon used only one device in his paintings—if he were confined to color fields for example—his work would make different demands. Instead, in finding variable uses of color and unleashing the force of color at different intensities, Bacon asks his viewer to see in multiple ways across a single painting. The field/structure pushes the viewer away into an expansive deep or high space and subjects her to infinity, the force/figure pulls her into the uncomfortable intimacy of a close-up and interruptive time, and the contours/objects suspend her at an ambiguous middle distance, riveting her to the present. Each spatial dimension corresponds to a different temporal dimension in Deleuze’s analysis: the eternity of the field, the instant of the force, and the present (witnessing) of the contour. Deleuze ultimately shows that Bacon’s paintings, and the force of color they unleash, scramble the distinction between space and time and demonstrate the visceral reality of non-linear, pre-conceptual sense.

### Toward Living Color

In emphasizing the temporal dimensions of color and painting, Deleuze challenges the separation of the arts into space and time-based categories. Rather than a theory of painting, Deleuze’s analysis of Bacon paves the way for more nuanced, philosophically urgent and ethically significant conceptions of color in relation to embodiment and sensibility. Deleuze emphasizes the ambiguity of color and its potential to activate unique spacio-temporal possibilities. Such a thought upends the long-standing description of color as inessential or secondary and the attendant (or prerequisite) descriptions of sensation as illusory, el-

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elementary, simplistic, or simply passive. Neither simple nor surmountable, color and sensation deserve additional investigation and valuation. They call out for more creative, expansive modes of expression and description.

Painting (particularly Bacon's paintings) unleashes the force of color, a force capable of provoking a synaesthetic sensation irreducible to any one of the five discernible senses or to any single sensibility (to disgust or violence e.g., which are often the associations encouraged by curators and critics with respect to Bacon). Color, the unchartable terrain of painting, activates a new mood, as yet unnamed, and a new localization of mood (in neither the head nor the heart).

Ultimately, Bacon's experiments with color and Deleuze's analyses of art might help us to

think in multiplicities rather than identities—helping us to sense complications without subsuming them under names or organizing them into themes. Bacon's handling of paint and his use of color expand the bounds of what color can accomplish, what color might be, and what it means to see or sense (in) color. His paintings, therefore, are invitations to activate powers of vision that remain dormant, latent or repressed. Deleuze is convinced that Bacon's paintings have the capacity to refashion the body into an original inarticulate unity of sensation, reaching out through color to grip a hand in the eye. If this is the case, they might also be training grounds for reconsidering the division of the senses (their enumeration as a discreet set of five) and opening ourselves to the possibility of a more expansive, ambiguous, and whole-bodied sense.

## ENDNOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxxi and xxxii.
2. *Ibid.*, xxix.
3. The link between color, bodies, and temporality is something Goethe considered in his 1810 *Theory of Colors*, but outside of artists like Kandinsky, Rothko, Josef Albers, and a few others, the significance and temporal dimension of color has remained largely unexplored.
4. Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasize the multiplicity of subjectivity at the start of *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2008), insisting: "The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us is several, there was already quite a crowd" (3). Similarly, in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Deleuze questions the notion of individuality and offers a picture of an infinitely overlapping and creased organism, writing, "insofar as [the soul] is filled with folds that stretch to infinity, [it] can always unfold a limited number of them inside itself, those that make up its subdivision or borough" (25).
5. See James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), "The Stream of Thought," 259ff.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 52.
7. Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?*, 173.
8. This is Bacon's description of what he is trying to achieve in his paintings. See David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 13.
9. *A Thousand Plateaus*, 191.
10. *Ibid.*, 211.
11. *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer in his review of Bacon's 1975 retrospective, quoted by Michael Peppiatt in *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 270.
12. The curator's essay for Bacon's 1975 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the museum's first retrospective of a living artist) began with a recognition of the precarious position Bacon occupied in the art world and the admission that "the audience that admires [Bacon's] work is large; the audience that dislikes it is smaller, but more vociferous, made up of artists and critics committed to the idea that we live in an era when the human figure has simply defied being portrayed explicitly." Quoted by Peppiatt in *Anatomy of an Enigma*, 270.
13. *Francis Bacon*, 32. Bacon makes a similar claim in his first interview with David Sylvester, explaining: "It's a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly on the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain" (*Interviews*



- with Francis Bacon, 18).
14. Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 8.
  15. The image of “stream” derives from James, who describes the “stream of thought” in his critical chapter in *The Principles of Psychology*. Bergson later invokes the same imagery to describe the immersion of a living body in life. One should read Deleuze’s concept of “sensation” in concert with James’s descriptions from *The Principles* and Bergson’s discussions in *Creative Evolution* and the opening chapter of *Time and Free Will*. This comparison extends beyond the scope of the current essay.
  16. *Francis Bacon*, 39.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. *Ibid.*, 45.
  19. *Ibid.* Similarly, Deleuze describes music as giving one “ears all over,” as if the logic of sensation differs relative to different mediums, exposing, decomposing and reorganizing the sensitive zones of bodies.
  20. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), 32. Describing “taboo disease,” Freud explains, “Obsessive prohibitions possess an extraordinary capacity for displacement; they make use of almost any form of connection to extend from one object to another and then in turn make this new object ‘impossible.’ . . . This impossibility finally lays an embargo upon the whole world” (*ibid.*, 38).
  21. Deleuze adopts the term “haptic” from Alois Riegl’s distinction between the up-close tactile perception of an artwork (the canvas, the paint, the strokes, etc.) and the optical perception of a work from a distance. See *Francis Bacon*, 163 n.2.
  22. *Ibid.*, 125.
  23. *Ibid.*, 42.
  24. Deleuze envisions a profoundly synaesthetic membrane at the core of every living body. In his analysis, sensation stands for the spark of animation, a burst of chaos that introduces a body to *feeling* and prefigures any subsequent ability to order, judge, measure, or reflect. Such a body lives in intimate connection with its world, moved or troubled by the slightest impression. The utter sensitivity of the body, its vulnerability and susceptibility to impact, comprises both a promise (of feeling intensely alive) and a threat (of being intensely damaged).
  25. *Francis Bacon*, xxxi.
  26. *Ibid.*, 3.
  27. *Ibid.*, 45.
  28. *Ibid.*, 111.
  29. Deleuze gives this chapter the diminutive title, “Note on Color.” The word “note” could be construed as a deliberate play on words—a gesture toward the co-mingling of painting and music (the musicality of painting/the color of sound) integral to Deleuze’s discussion of painting in *Francis Bacon* and also in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze often invokes Olivier Messiaen’s composition “Chronochromie” in connection with the acoustic, temporal dimension of line (see *Francis Bacon*, 119). He also considers the “tone” of color in connection with musical tones on pages 106–08, an analogy also favored by Wittgenstein in his *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Linda McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), as he discusses *Farbeton*.
  30. *Francis Bacon*, xxx.
  31. Long before Bacon, Pierre Bonnard mixed a bit of one color into all the other colors he would use in the same painting, lending the whole canvas a feel of being tinged with yellow, orange, or green. Each color thereby retains a trace of an underlying color armature, and the painting radiates a particular quality of light.
  32. *Francis Bacon*, 118, 119.
  33. Wittgenstein makes a similar claim for the contextuality of color in his *Remarks on Colour*. In particular, he asks, “What if someone asked me to give the *exact* shade of colour that I see there [in a particular spot]?—How should it be described and how determined? Someone could ask me to produce a colour sample (a rectangular piece of paper of this colour). I don’t say that such a comparison would be utterly uninteresting, but it shows us that it isn’t from the outset clear how shades of colour are to be compared and what ‘sameness of colour’ means” (§59, 10e).
  34. *Francis Bacon*, 120.
  35. *Ibid.*, 42.
  36. The fleshy elements of Bacon’s work produce an uncomfortable sense of intimacy one might compare with the “proximity” Levinas associates with *il y a*, cinematic close-ups, and the face to face. In particular, the experience of the *il y a* is one way Levinas describes one’s subjection to something inarticulate, unknowable, and invisible—and nonetheless utterly gripping and pervasive. In his 1947 text *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphoso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), he describes the *il y a* as “nocturnal space”

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(54), “a swarming of points,” and “a field of forces... a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one” (53). Such language foreshadows Deleuze’s descriptions of sensation as “the point where rhythm . . . plunges into chaos, into the night” (*Francis Bacon*, 39), “a plurality of constituting domains” (*ibid.*, 33), and “a movement ‘in-place’” (*ibid.*, 36).

37. *Ibid.*, 121.

38. Merleau-Ponty attributed this third use of color (“color-contour”) to Cézanne and his unique ability to let color generate its own edge. Merleau-

Ponty explains: “Outline should . . . be a result of the colors if the world is to be given in its true density. For the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed.” “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 65.

39. *Francis Bacon*, 122.

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