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SHAUN GLADWELL AND THE SPIRIT OF GRAVITY: FROM STORM SEQUENCE TO INVERTED MONUMENTS

On the evening of October 19, 2024, an extraordinary spontaneous compositional event took place on the forecourt of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney. Adam Luxford, himself a renowned practitioner of the art of vertical skateboarding, had been commissioned to erect a halfpipe ramp for an event led by the artist and former amateur world-champion freestyle skater, Shaun Gladwell, next to the Lindy Lee sculpture, *Secret World of a Starlight Ember* (as it happens, Lee was Gladwell's art school supervisor). This chance meeting of a blue wooden ramp and a chrome-plated toroid form in a public space immediately triggered ripples in my mind. Initially constricted in their amplitude by a huge cruise ship that happened to be parked in front of the MCA, these waves suddenly expanded as the ship departed with a blast of its foghorn, opening up this spontaneous resonance field to the contribution of Utzon's Sydney Opera House (which is itself one of Sydney's original skate sites). The blue curves of the ramp, the grey mass of the clouds above, the lines drawn by the skaters and BMX riders, the silver curves of the sculpture, and the concrete sails of the Sydney Opera House entered into a kind of radiant conversation conducted in the language of reflective curves.

Lee seems almost to have anticipated this moment of accidental collaboration in describing the desired effect of her sculpture "we ripple out into the world and the world ripples into us." We might also recall here the architect Louis Kahn's response upon seeing the reflective white tiles of the Opera House responding to the world around them: "The sun did not know how beautiful its light was, until it was reflected off this building." In this sense, Gladwell, Utzon, Lee, and Luxford may be viewed as collaborating across decades of time to express an expansive conception of art in which the object is no longer forcibly isolated or governed by a dominating intention, but carried beyond its own boundaries by waves of resonance, sparking surprising harmonic relationship which, at least potentially, as Kahn indicates, vibrate with the entire solar system.

In this essay, I try to catch some of the waves that ripple through Shaun Gladwell's career as a video artist, from his breakthrough work *Storm Sequence* (2000), to his current project *Inverted Monuments* (still in production as I write). The waves in question are fed by the artist's lifelong love of skateboarding and other action sports, considered as both the content of his art and a form of personal self-discipline. Gladwell's art conspicuously and repeatedly centres on the disciplined anarchy of skateboarders grinding ledges in shopping malls, free runners launching themselves across gaps between office buildings, and break dancers spinning on their heads in the middle of the street. He takes these culturally marginal, often illegal activities and places them in the centre (or sometimes in front of) of the world's most prestigious art galleries.

There is more at stake in this exploratory project than a fixation on a recurrent theme. Skateboarding is more than just a convenient content that Gladwell happens to be able to provide for his own work. It is the specific, if rarely described tonal spectrum specifically available to the sense of balance, I will argue, that is the palette that Gladwell's work draws upon, a palette that traditional rhetorics of criticism are unlikely to recognise. Like a skater building his own unauthorised skatepark out of found scraps of readymade industrial waste found on an abandoned building site, Gladwell has developed his own zone of practice and experimentation that can only be articulated in terms of our embodied relationship to gravity.

THE WAVE AND THE POLE: SLOW MOTION AND THE BODY

Skateboarding began as 'sidewalk surfing', a way of bringing the wide-open freedom of the seas experienced by surfers into the controlled environments of modern cities and suburbs. A skateboard is essentially a tool for exploring urban spaces in ways never intended by their designers. Gladwell's work, *Storm Sequence*, shows the artist surfing on concrete, performing freestyle skateboard moves in slow motion as a storm approaches Bondi Beach. He is doing tic tacs and spacewalks – basic tricks this one-time amateur world champion could have pulled off with his eyes closed, if not for the wet, treacherous surface on which he has chosen to execute them.

The action of the video is thus staged at the edge in several senses at once: at the border between land and sea, at the threshold of a sublime event of nature, at the limit of a urethane wheel's ability to grip on a wet surface, and therefore, on the verge of the artist himself falling.

The use of slow motion in Storm Sequence is continuous and non-selective. Instead of isolating and extending a privileged instant chosen for its decisive impact in achieving victory or defeat, as might happen in conventional sport coverage, Gladwell slows everything down to a glacial crawl for the duration. This has a remarkable effect. Instead of seeing Gladwell-the-skater as master and commander of his own body, acting on the world to accomplish goals, we see the waves that he initiates within himself develop and amplify according to their own differential speeds and dynamics. We see his body itself evolving as a complex wave form. In this sense, the waves and tides converging from every direction in Storm Sequence arise not only in the sea, or from the turbulent sky above, but also in the performer's own body. Non-selective slow motion expresses a kind of passivity at the heart of every action, as time is distended to the point where it ceases to function as the measure of an accomplishment in space.

In a perhaps unsurprisingly rare example of an extended philosophical reflection on the implications of new action sports, Gilles Deleuze suggests:

The kind of movements you find in sports and habits are changing. We got by for a long time with an energetic conception of motion, where there's a point of contact, or we are the source of movement. Running, putting the shot, and so on: effort, resistance, with a starting point, a lever. But nowadays we see movement defined less and less in relation to a point of leverage. All the new sports – surfing, windsurfing, hang-gliding – take the form of entering into an existing wave. There's no longer an origin as starting point, but a sort of putting-into-orbit. The key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to 'get into something' instead of being the origin of an effort."

Deleuze is right to radically differentiate between traditional sport and action sports. He is also right that this difference has something to do with the ecstasy of catching a wave, going with the flow, taking a ride. What the philosopher misses, and Gladwell's work repeatedly shows us, is the crucial distinction between a fixed centre and the dynamics of centring.

A shot putter begins by doing the very thing that Gladwell never stops doing during the length of Storm Sequence: spinning around his own centre of gravity. A shot putter, like a skater, is decentred, visibly thrown off balance in a kind of crisis, by the wave he generates within himself. But he does not know how to ride the wave; he cannot allow his own body to be thrown in turn by the wave. As soon as the projectile separates from his hands, he rides the momentum out as quickly as he can, allowing any residual potential energy generated in his body to dissipate and return to equilibrium. He lets the shotput go, but he cannot go with it. He has a linear, measurable goal – to project the object as far as possible – and that is all he cares about.

This, however, is exactly what we see Gladwell doing in Storm Sequence: generating multiple waves from his own centre that repeatedly take him on a ride, propelling the performer himself beyond his own centre. Deleuze's attempt to draw an exclusive distinction between orthodox sports that involve generating actions from one's own centre as a point of leverage and new sports that involve submitting to the sublime momentum of waves is thereby 'deconstructed' by Gladwell's use of slow motion, and ultimately by these new sports themselves, surfing included. In terms of the rhetoric of 'theory', Gladwell's works suggest the need to recognise a distinction between the activity of centring and the notion of a given or stable centre. Centring of the kind repeatedly featured and studied in Gladwell's video art is only necessary when the centre can no longer be taken for granted, as the body is taken to the limit of its possibilities. Centring is how you keep going beyond safe limits. The sense of balance has a deeply affective aspect, since it is linked to the fear of falling, but it also implies the joy of overcoming that fear through skilful self-mastery. There are irreducible thresholds of experience that open when bodies hold their centre of gravity at the very edge of human possibility.

STRANGER ON A TRAIN: INVERSION IN METRO AREA

At first it is hard to say what you are looking. A strange figure unfolds from itself to reveal a levitating man with a mushroom cloud for a beard performing some kind of weird calisthenics in a zero-gravity environment. The surrounding space is closed, clean, isolated, synthetic, extruded. The figure could be an astronaut. You can see he is grabbing onto one of a long row of small blue hoops, which previous movie viewings might suggest are placed to allow astronauts to propel themselves along the radial shafts of a space station. We could be looking at

a lost scene from 2001: A Space Odyssey or Alien. Or perhaps the latest reportage on the astronauts currently trapped in orbit on the International Space Station, which would explain the exorbitant beardage.

As the unexplained man's body twists and rotates, it seems hard to decide if he is grabbing onto the hoops for dear life or desperately trying to break free. Something doesn't compute. Several different sci-fi scenarios seem plausible. Everything seems enigmatic, disorienting, struck with ambiguity. There is something wrong about the torsion of the apparent astronaut's muscles. At some point you realise the image has been inverted and the man must be inverted himself, hanging upside down from the structure. The whole scene is taking place within an everyday, earthbound train carriage. So, there is a double inversion that is found in many of Gladwell's videos: first, Gladwell hangs himself upside down; then the image itself is inverted.

Metro Area (2024) moves in extreme slow motion, accentuating the sense of lunar weightlessness, deepening the enigma of each movement performed by the man of unknown origin. As in Storm Sequence, this reduction in speed dictates your encounter with the image. What you see is not so much a body completing actions from an external and securely separate point of view, rather the emergence of possible actions in the body. In a strange way, this weirdness, this distancing of slow motion, brings you closer, even puts you 'inside' the body you are viewing, since each of his searching movements becomes a sort of question, a process of bodily research, for performer and viewer alike, so that we also are held in suspense waiting to discover the answer. Every movement is like a stab in the dark, testing out opportunities for further movement. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev – with reference to the earlier Tangara (2003) (for which Metro Area is a kind of sequel or reprise) – offers a sort of proprioceptive perspective.

The use of extreme slow motion in video is, of course, far from being an unprecedented innovation. In each case, this cinematic effect structures the viewer's relationship to the unfolding content in specific ways. Gladwell has said that he likes the way slow motion brings out the 'detail' in content. This emphasis seems to imply that slow motion works as a kind of temporal 'zoom'. The zoom reveals spatial detail; slow motion reveals temporal detail. In this sense, slow motion is not a distortion of 'normal' time, but the creation of an alternative, equally valid temporal perspective that transforms our relation to the content. Addressing the work of Bill Viola, Marjorie Perloff has associated the 'reductionist' use of slow motion in video art with a 'fractal' aesthetic:

Much of Viola's reductionism, his slow, patient analysis of a buffalo's eye or the branches of a tree, have to do with this new form of "fractal" measure. Look at a standard travel poster featuring a glacial lake and the blue oval, surrounded by snowy mountains, will not seem all that remarkable. But now take the same lake and focus on an inch of rippling lake water and all sorts of things become apparent. (The Morphology of the Amorphous: Bill Viola's Videoscapes)

Where Viola characteristically focusses on orchestrated displays of emotion deprived of any object or reference, Gladwell's studies bodies in intensive interaction with the contingencies of their surrounding environment. Despite the vastly different themes, there is arguably a 'fractal' dimension to the use of slow motion in the work of both artists. Insofar as any organism's perception of time is determined by its specific biological needs and constraints, we are trapped as human beings in a narrow band of the coastline of time yet remain immersed within the 'full body' of time as it surges in waves within and around us. Gladwell's use of slow motion reveals the previously unperceived levels of temporal complexity implicit in every action; the virtual infinity of the 'specious present', that minimal interval in which we are able to perceive movement as happening 'now': the body itself as a complex wave form. His slow-motion studies demonstrate that we are constantly caught up in temporal interactions and rhythms that bypass our awareness yet determine the range and shape of that awareness. Each gesture seems to unfold like a flower or a work of origami, the moving body crossed by contending rhythms that uncoil at different speeds through muscles and limbs that no longer seem to be defined by the teleology of a single purpose.

The sense of balance is the most complex sense we possess and utterly crucial to our survival. It is full-body and cross-modal, conscripting inputs from the visual system, but also the vestibular system of the inner ear, as well as proprioceptive feedback from muscles. An art that addresses the sense of balance must therefore be, if not anti-retinal, at least trans-retinal. To get the Gladwell thing, if I am right, you need not only to look with your eyes, but also to think with your inner ear and theorise with your muscles. We may be forced to view these images from a distance – a necessity Gladwell seems determined to transcend with his recent forays in virtual reality – but that viewing is engineered to provoke vestibular and proprioceptive resonances, and therefore to address us at the level of equilibrioception, i.e., the sense of balance (at a neurological level, it would be necessary to consider

the role played by so-called mirror neurons in the development of human locomotion, alongside the well-documented effects of brain state entrainment or synchronisation exerted by the viewing of moving images).

Our erect bodies, which enable the lighthouse-like dominance of our visual sense, constitute what has been called an unlikely 'antigravity pole'. We stand straight and tall at the cost of a prolonged ordeal of helplessness during infancy, terrible spinal vulnerability throughout our lives (something the author knows about), and a continual risk of falling that becomes life-threatening in our old age. The human gait is essentially a perpetually deferred catastrophe. There is an irreducible interval of unbalancing, of letting go of one's own centre, that is intrinsic to bipedal motion. Every step we take on this earth begins as a fall. Human bipedal motion is uniquely perilous and, let's face it, slightly ridiculous (hence the universal comic of banana peels and abandoned roller skates, which have the virtue of instantly transforming their victims into involuntary skaters).

Moreover, research in infantile development shows there is no pre-programmed path to acquire the skill of walking (some infants, for example, go through a period of 'bum walking', some do not. There is no standard or obligatory path in acquiring the skill of walking). The acquisition of walking is genuinely improvised by every infant; the result of an open exploratory learning process for every one of us, not the switching on of an innate capacity or the running of a preprogrammed algorithm. Anyone who can walk has endured and affirmed this joyfully dangerous process of deep, embodied learning. Anyone who can walk has known what it is like to try a strange new bodily skill, to fall again and again, to just keep on going until they get it wired. Anyone who can walk is already a kind of skater or surfer, a survivor of the comic banana peel attack, a verified Gravnaut.

How do skaters, BMXers, and break dancers learn to ride the multiple waves connecting their bodies to the centre of the earth through the action of gravity? As we all do. By going for it, falling, then going for it again, exactly like a child learning to walk. There may be little trace of narrative in Gladwell's work, but there is usually a kind of drama. In this case, the overhead supports of the Metro carriage are designed to help humans avoid falling, to minimise the dangers of mass transit, but Gladwell deliberately uses them to invite the risk of falling, to raise the stakes of every move he makes. Gladwell takes the neutral space of a mass transit vehicle made to move bodies from A to B and turns it into a world of unexpected possibilities: a tightly defined world where the body is intimately constrained by metal structures and yet ceaselessly seeks new degrees of freedom, afforded by those very constraints.

The simple decision to invert the function of designed space provides a kind of dramatic physical premise that puts the performer's body at risk of injury and pain. These inversions of function occur throughout the performances featured in Gladwell's art, especially when it is his own body being put on the line. In the student work, Sydney Guide to Recent Architecture (2000), where Gladwell rides the curved wall of a flowing fountain, as well as Storm Sequence, it is the addition of water to the skating surface. In Approach to Mundi Mundi (2007), it is the act of letting go of the handlebars of a speeding motor bike, so that it must be controlled purely by balance instead of steering, just like a skateboard. In Interceptor Surf Sequence (2009), it is the decision to climb out of the window of a speeding car and ride on a roof designed to insulate humans from their surrounding environment. In Pacific Undertow Sequence (Bondi) (2010), Gladwell attains peak passivity by trying to catch waves on a surfboard while upside down and underwater. Unable to monitor the horizon for incoming sets, he is purely at the mercy of tidal forces, which surge around and over him like a kind of blue space plasma. The artist adopts the posture of a surfer ready for action, only to be tossed around like a rag doll by incoming waves, his bodily form finally consumed by billowing clouds of white water.

The ancient Greeks imagined that we were once like angels, unbound to the terrestrial plane, until our wings were tragically clipped by birth in human form, leaving only the dull pain of our wounded stumps to remind us of our lost freedom. Thousands of years later, Nietzsche railed against the Spirit of Gravity as a heaviness that holds us down, infects us with stultifying seriousness, suppresses our power. Gladwell's counter move is to show bodies performing at their limits, in affirmation of gravity. Storm Sequence is a work of anti-Platonic anamnesis, an unforgetting that seeks to reawaken the Spirit of Gravity as a prototype of the will to experiment that has lived within us all; to remind us, in the words of another philosopher of power, that "we do not know what our bodies can do" (Spinoza).

As I see it, Gladwell's video work is not ultimately about 'defying gravity' or evoking a ghostly world where the law of gravity no longer applies; nor is it the all-too-familiar condemnation of urban life as alienated and sterile. These are all automatically available cliches that previous critics have been too quick to bring to his work. Gladwell's art is above all a playful affirmation of gravity, a kind of love song that celebrates our immanence to the field of gravity. It does not evoke a condition of urban alienation; it outlines strategies for overcoming alienation,

permanently unfinished blueprints for truly living in designed spaces. It partakes, documents, and extends the reinvention of space that has driven the worldwide shift from traditional, codified sports towards 'action sports' like skateboarding, activities which are pursued both as forms of expression and as a means to discover new degrees of freedom.

We can now propose the elements of a kind of generative template for 'classic Gladwell' video art.

Content: Action Sports that involve risk (skating, surfing, BMX, breakdancing, parours, trick motorbike riding, etc). A highly skilled performer, often the artist himself, filmed in the act of balancing and centring.

Performance Condition: The rule, as I have decided to name it, of $-1=+1$. This rule demands the addition of an extra, unexpected element (for example, water) that denies the performer a usually reliable condition in the given action scenario (for example, wheel grip). The $+1=-1$ rule at once raises the stakes and therefore the seriousness of the performance, introducing real risk, and simultaneously renders it absurd, like a slowed down outtake from a lost episode of Jackass.

Form: Non-selective extreme slow motion and inversion.

I think these elements define the continuum which Gladwell's videos construct and uniquely explore, each in their own way. They outline the shape of the skatepark he has built for himself, as it were, but each ride potentially leads to the discovery of new moves.

FREEZE RESPONSE: THE PRODUCTION STILLS

There is a kind of standard skateboard photograph format. We could call it "the rad moment" as a variant of Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment'. The skater is shown 'on the cusp', at the limit of possibility, frozen at the unlikely, perilous moment of 're-entry'. The prototype for this style of action photography, which borrows heavily from surf photography, transformed by the possibility of taking a serious slam on a hard surface, was probably the 'one-wheeler' shot pioneered in the 1970s. The skater is caught turning at the limit of the ramp or at the edge of the empty pool's vertical wall, pivoting on the one remaining wheel that prevents the disastrous fall caused by 'hanging up' (a moment where board and body part: the board left hanging on the lip, the body sent plummeting helplessly to the concrete by the law of inertia).

As it happens, the current writer's adolescent years were entirely ruled by the desire to know what it felt like to experience this 'radical moment' from within. What he discovered is that there is a suspended instant of weightlessness in this peak experience, a unique affect that is felt in the body and remembered like an internal snapshot of impossible freedom. You photograph yourself inside yourself. You are amazed at what you see your own body doing. This is known as 'being stoked'.

Gladwell also produces photographs from his video filming sessions. It seems significant that he chooses to call the photographs he produces 'production shots'. This reference to the tradition of documenting the film-making process suggests the photographs refer to another medium in a way that is intrinsic and defining.

What the photos cannot do, unlike the temporal art of video, is stage a moment of reveal in which we realise that both the performer and the image itself are inverted. Instead, the image is enveloped in a kind of ambient ambiguity. The typical Gladwell content – bodies caught in acts of centring – lends itself to an intrinsic sense of compositional balance that Gladwell manipulates with effects of inversion, reflection, and framing. The images produced in this way are often at once mesmerising and disorientating in their very symmetry. The photos powerfully evoke an outer space condition (which also means they evoke a uterine condition, as Kubrick and others have shown), freed from the bonds of the earth (the stills produced for *Pataphysical Man* (2005) and *Pacific Undertow Sequence* (Bondi) are exemplary in way they present bodies in an atmosphere of ambient ambiguity).

In a sense, these photographs seem to invoke the very same traditional imaginary of liberation from gravity that is initially elicited, tested and inverted in the videos. For me, if the videos show us what bodies can do, the photographs express what it feels like to discover these capacities within yourself. The sensation of freedom from constraint that is earned precisely by interacting with constraints and taking a ride to their limit. The 'classic' Gladwell production shots amplify this exquisite internal sense of weightlessness experienced at the moment of 're-entry'.

Something shifts decisively, however, when we come to Gladwell's most recent project.

AFTER THE FLOOD: INVERTED MONUMENTS

When you go inverse, blood begins to rush to your head as soon as you flip over. Eventually, that can cause a blood vessel to rupture or trigger a brain haemorrhage. But that's not the biggest problem. Most complications are caused by asphyxiation, or the lack of oxygen. When you're upside down, your organs put extra weight on your lungs, making it harder to breathe. Heart problems can also arise because you have a lot more blood flowing toward your heart, meaning your heart has to pump harder than usual. And dangling for too long is bad for your eyes too. The pressure inside your eye can double when you're upside down, which can cause vision problems. (What Happens to Your Body If You Hang Upside Down for Too Long. LIFEHACKER)

If etymology tells us that monument means 'reminder', what is an inverted monument? What does it mean to 'invert' the function of a monument?

Inverted Monuments seems to me to mark a radical departure from 'classic Gladwell', a sharp fork in the road he has built and ridden throughout his career. The new works, presented as usual in inverted form, show the artist himself hanging upside down from massive stone monuments, many of them in or near Sydney's Hyde Park (itself a dead skate spot, deeply mourned by the skating community).

This time we find neither the kind of sublime encounter with gathering natural forces we saw in Storm Sequence, nor the futuristic ambience of works like Pacific Undertow Sequence (Bondi) or Metro Area. Instead, we find the artist literally bound to the weight of the past. Gladwell is physically tied to the object with ropes, in a kind of public shibaru, like a Ulysses or Turner bound to a mast, but this time upside down, exposed to the storms of time. There is little movement in these videos compared to classic Gladwell, fewer signs of visible struggle and interactivity, and therefore less tension between the moving footage and production stills, but there is also a more intense sense of duration, or, to put it more bluntly, suffering. The drama is heightened this time by the addition of an element that stops the performer from falling, instead of making the fall more likely.

It is impossible to see a body hanging from a rope without thinking of violence. From the beginning, as we have seen, Gladwell has worked to disclose the irreducible degree of passivity implicit in action, in the form of waves that traverse the body and propel it beyond its own centre, but these new images seem almost entirely consumed by a spirit of submission. Instead of standing tall and erect, Gladwell hangs upside down, at the dead point of equilibrium, unable to interact with the world. It is as though the movement and the risk that characterised the earlier work has been internalised as a kind of suspended intensity in the form of blood rushing to his head: as if Gladwell is trying to force himself to think against the weight of the past. The images read to me as an unsalute, a declaration of unfreedom. Not so much as a gesture of contempt for the historical figures celebrated – Robert Burns, for one, was a Scottish anti-colonialist and ardent champion of revolutions, as I understand it – but as a refusal to complacently inherit and inhabit the territory these monuments overlook and define.

The idea that came to me on viewing Inverted Monuments is that the storm clouds and waves summoned up by Gladwell, nearly a quarter of a century ago at Bondi Beach, have finally swept through the city, leaving the artist-surfer dangling from its defining monuments like a broken Christmas decoration. Monuments exist to remind us that we are indebted to 'founding fathers' for the freedom to inhabit and move within the very space they dominate. A heavy stone monument is like a wall, a temporal barrier located in space, that blocks us from access to the denied past, the disavowed inheritance, the founding violence involved in seizing territory. The tone of excessive submission evident in Inverted Monuments in this way becomes a protest in the context of the mandatory celebration of 'our' shared 'terra nullius' heroic inheritance. Gladwell is a stain in the visible field of mythical colonial history, a fly in the ointment, a bug on a windscreen. This stain looks back at us to provoke inklings of shame and the recognition of disavowed grief, but also a kind of mute laughter at the absurd pretence of these Erect Men, reflected in the ridiculous helplessness of the artist's own hanging body.

Bill Schaffer, retired lecturer in Film Studies, broken skater. 2024