

5: IN YOUR EYE // LACY FACE // OCULAR NERVE // WRITING AS RECEPTION

Prelude // Reorientation // Philosophical Bit

Cast your mind back, briefly, to the methods of ideokinesis: attempting to get a feeling for an anatomical fact through imagery that distills it into an analogy—a moving picture, a picture that moves you.

In dance, ideokinesis (under many names and variants) is often used as a training element to find greater ease in alignment, to help release and repattern places of neuromuscular tension. It's oriented toward efficiency and neutrality. But there's a concomitant experiential fruit of each image that I treasure as a way to find new moods in my own thinking.

Implicit in this approach is the proposition that moving (also thinking) entails a process of modeling, which moves forward into use and action by testing the model. The model gradually shifts in receptive response to the pressures and findings of the test. The model (the moving picture) is an instrument, not a settled truth.

This all assumes the principal that the modeling (you could say “conceptualizing” instead, but I like the hands-on feeling of “modeling”) works to collapse the overwhelm of the real complexity of the body's orchestration of trillions of cells into something perceptible. At the same time the model becomes a kind of vehicle you can ride forward into explorations (a craft moving through an ocean, o pelagian). This practice picks up models not as hard stable truths but as experiments: What happens (in my body / in my thinking / in my writing / in the radius of my being) if I choose to embrace this picture? As with any distillation of superabundant reality to a model, the trick is to test it, not just trust it (and not to forget that even if it bears fruit, it's a partial answer and not a skeleton key). What does it yield? What does it miss? What is its practical power to help you navigate a world/a crisis/a day? What type of information does its particular sensitivity register? The goal is to seek out a model's usefulness experientially, finding out what it enables.

Model as a picture in your mind's eye. Test as a responsive meeting of the model and the pressures of experience. Maybe test can also equal play: to play the model (as one plays an instrument).

Anatomical Facts And Images

Eyes & Seeing: Lacy Face, Ocular Nerve, Seeing as Reception

“In its first dumb form / language was a gesture / technique of traveling over sea ice / silent / before great landscapes and glittering processions / vastness of great white lonely north / of our fore being”

—Susan Howe, from “Secret History of the Dividing Line”

“The scarlet oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth. We cannot see anything until we are possessed by the idea of it — and then we can hardly see anything else . . . There is just as much beauty visible in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate.”

—Henry Thoreau, from “Autumnal Tints”

Consider seeing as a process whose direction is not outward, a reaching-out from the eyeballs toward the seen, but inward: the incoming waves of light pass through the bony architecture of the front face and travel across the skull horizontally to the visual cortex at the rear, where what is seen takes shape as a map of the world — the seamless continuous incursion of the world which we then inhabit and co-shape — circular process as the condition of

our seeing — a feedback loop that can be fed by both deliberate and unconscious pictures — elemental relationship of the eye to the hand — circuit from the eye to the hand and back.

Lacy Face

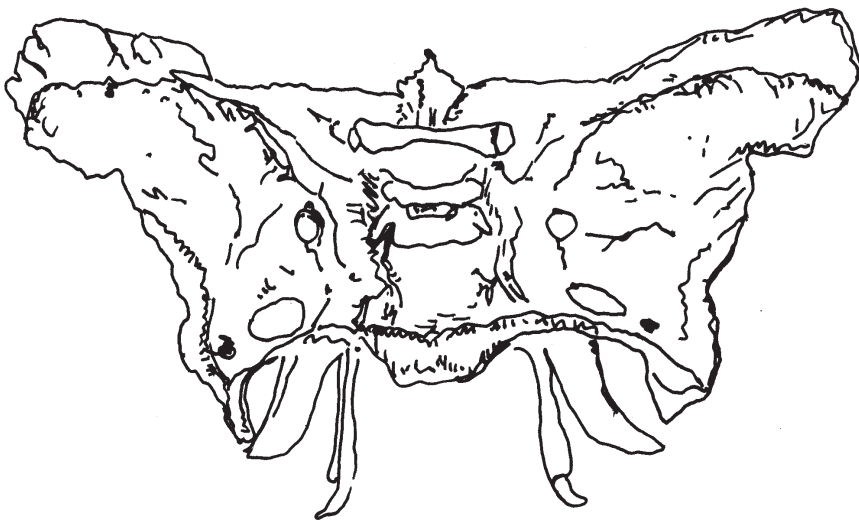
I've lost track of whose phrase “lacy face” is. Perhaps relayed to me from someone describing someone's words in class. After hours of trawling through my bookshelf, I have not been able to find the source. Anyway, thank you to whoever conveyed it. It's an image that stuck with me, one that I love to come back to, and I present it to you now.

The lace:

The skull is made of 22 bones, 14 facial bones and 8 cranial bones (which support the brain). All these bones are joined by suture, or lines of adjacency. (Suture joints, which are only found in the skull, are fibrous, and allow a tiny bit of movement.) With the exception of the jawbone, none of the bones of the face meet in articulating joints, so it's easy to forget they're there, but the lacy face image relies on retracing these little coastlines where the bones meet in order to reimagine the skull as numerous. In each orbit (or eye socket), seven bones meet, leaving a small cavity open at the back, through which the optic nerve runs horizontally across the brain through a series of relays to the visual cortex, a region of the brain at the back of the head, where images are formed from the incoming news of light waves.

Sphenoid

The very beautiful sphenoid bone forms part of the orbit, meeting it from behind. Study its shape, note its depth in the skull — behind the front of the face except where it reaches the surface to the side of the eyes, but in front of the brain. Indulge in its delicate, wingy beauty. Watch it hang there, wings wide.



Optic Nerve

News of the light outside travels into us via the optic nerve, transmitting information about brightness, color, and contrast in the portion of the spectrum most relevant to our form of navigation. This allows us to map the space we inhabit so that we may successfully move through it.

The fact to get a feeling for here is its directionality: seeing is a receptive function, relaying its news to the rear of the brain.

The pair to this fact is the idea that our seeing (in the sense of the pictures we form of the world in front of us) takes place not at the eyeballs but in our back body.

(The real path of the optic nerves is a kind of criss-crossing frog shape. But in this visualization, since the rear-moving direction of receptivity is the focus, I find it useful to elide cross-patterned shape into a simple line.)

Visualization Script

See back pages for link to audio guide of this visualization.

After learning something about the anatomic facts, the next step in ideokinesis is to entertain images that analogize the anatomy into a simple moving picture you can watch in your imagination. Ideokinesis visualization takes place in stillness, often lying down, sometimes standing, eyes closed. The script of the visualization is below.

To activate the image of the lacy face, visualize the bones of the face as panels of lace, with the openings in the lace pattern running along the squiggly suture lines between bones.

Then fill in a lace pattern that you like.

I like to play this image with the lace:

See your lacy face as if it's a lace curtain hanging in the window of a kitchen door that opens onto the outside. See the lace hang at place where your own facial bones are, dropping from above your head to below your jaw, passing through your eyes.

It is sunrise. Watch the light of the outside spill into the kitchen through the lace. Watch the light spill through. Feel the heat, sense the change of color, as this light enters the room.

It is night. Imagine a lit lamp on the kitchen table and darkness outside. See the light spill through the lace into the darkness outside. Watch the light spill out.

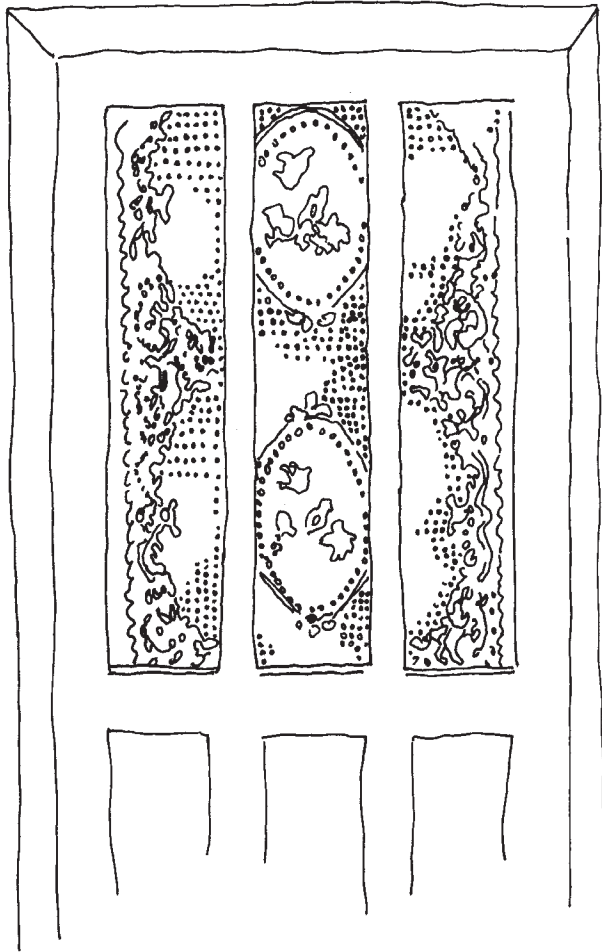
Sunrise and the light spills in.

Nighttime and the light spills out.

Then lie down so that your face is pointing toward the ceiling. Transform the image. See the meandering suture lines between the bones of the face as if they are streams cutting through fields. Watch the water move. Feel the soft warmth of the mud.

Now change the image. See the topography of your face as the surface of a glacier, and the suture streams as channels of meltwater. Bring your attention to the opening at the back (bottom, as you are facing if lying down) of the orbit. Imagine this cavity that makes a channel for the optic nerve is a moulin in a glacier – a melting place where a tunnel has opened directly, vertically, down, so that surface water melts and pours down under the glacier and rushes out to sea. Watch the meltwater pour through the opening and rush to the sea of

your brain, to inform and join the ocean of your images of the world. Focus on the direction and pull of that rush.



Part 3: Transplanting And Playing The Images As Writing Games

Note: There are two types of prompts here. One (as with earlier installments in this series) works with an anatomy analogy to propose a shape and filter through which to retell a borrowed story. That is, the anatomy fact is used as a tool to make choices about how to tell a story. But the soft unsettling opening that comes from being conscious instead of automatic in our visual processing feels so ever-present that I wanted to also offer some prompts that didn't reach all the way to storytelling, that instead just focused on tuning and exploring the meeting place between seeing and language. These tuning exercises are more oriented toward a daily pages type of practice than the completion of a prose/script object.

Tuning Prompts

Tuning Practice I: Slow Field Thing Observation

(“field” = field of vision)

Position yourself somewhere with a view of something relatively still. It might be a view of the corner of your room, a view out a window, or it could be a still life you arrange as if you were about to paint it in a watercolor class for retirees (waving to Mort & Rita beyond the grave).

Write a field observation. Build the sense of the field by taking your impressions of what is in front of you and transferring them back through a relay. Let the relay simply be a pause, a conscious moment in your seeing when you attempt to let the being of thing show itself to you. Try to entertain the image that this relay has a physical location behind your eyes, toward the back of your brain.

Record what takes shape in that pause. This might mean that instead of a typical description that depends on the most practical or aesthetically pleasing names, categories and identifications, your pause/relay/being-welcomer allows you to perceive the thing in front of you in a new way—a way that isn't necessarily useful to you (or at least not in a way you already understand). Don't limit yourself individual things. Observe the relationships between the elements of the field too. Stay open to a perception of groupings or continuities you might never have noticed in a more navigationally-attuned, pragmatically-minded glance. This is a micro practice in seeing beyond habitual categories.

You might find (I do) that you need to give yourself reminders or little tasks to help you inhibit habit – first, just try to be less active with your focus by activating your peripheral vision and calling it soft focus. I find it useful to let myself look for visual categories (contrast, hue, brightness) but without attaching them to the edges of discrete objects — this performs a kind of first undoing of habitual seeing even though I am still defining what I am looking for and not yet being receptive. But it works for me as a kind of gateway. I also find that I tend to notice a lot of information about direction and facing, and that helps me start to sense relationships between things that are otherwise independent of me or my use of the scene (as say something to walk through or retrieve an object from).

Record whatever words come, without manipulations for sense of flow or accuracy. Listen for the words that suggest themselves when you practice the pause. Allow the “wrong” names for things if that's what you hear suggesting itself. Don't force yourself to write continuously in freewrite mode, just write when words suggest themselves in your mind's ear.

A patron saint of this kind of seeing/hearing is Gertrude Stein, the holy book her *Tender Buttons*. Although you may have no interest in wilding out to Steinian degrees, allow yourself to play with the permissions she gives you. Here's something she said about writing *Tender Buttons*: “I had to feel anything and everything that was for me existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name. The name of a thing might be something in itself if it could come to be real enough but just as a name it was not enough something.”

Dimensions: Constrain this practice with either time (set a timer for 2 or 5 or 10 minutes) or number (commit to one paragraph, to one page, to two pages, to a hundred words...). Perhaps try doing it every day for a week, or every day until you fill a small notebook.

Tuning 2: Field Activity Observation With Parafield Fiction

Put yourself somewhere with a view where there is a good amount of movement (on any speed or scale). Write a field observation by recording what passes and occupies the portion of the world you are observing. Try to be on the passive side, letting activity flag itself for your attention instead of roving with your focus. Use an alternating rhythm, seeing then writing, then seeing, then writing. On regular intervals (try for every thirty seconds or every minute), remind yourself that seeing is a receptive process. For those of us who use sight to navigate, the coherence of the spatial field and the work of clocking our available paths and perches within it will likely automatically dominate our mental pictures. As much as you can, discard the idea that you are going to move through the space

you are looking at, and collect a scatter of impressions that aren't coherent or adjacent. Write in fragments. Do this for 5–10 minutes.

Then place your page with the collected scatter of impressions next to you, and without obligation to match the actual space you were looking at, make new sense of these impressions in descriptive prose (a paragraph or a page) or in a captioned/annotated map. In this portion of the tuning exercise, you now play the role of the visual cortex, putting a huge array of impressions together into a picture of a visual-spatial field. Be playful. Allow pathway and perch to be relevant here. Freely entertain the question of who or what moves through this parafield. Finish there, or perhaps leave yourself a list of possible stories, questions, or memories that might be held inside or pass through this imagined field, in a future piece of writing.

Storytelling Prompts

Storytelling 1

Retell a borrowed story (as with earlier entries in this somatics series, I suggest borrowing a folk tale or a news item so that the basic stuff of the telling doesn't need to be invented and you can focus on the shape of the telling). Pay particular attention to the visual field offered up either to the reader or to a character within the story. Find a point when can you let a disparate array of visual details knit together into a sense of a field, perhaps in a surprising way. Think about the way the field of vision at any given time defines the seer's sense of where they can and cannot move. What obstacles are in the path? What paths are beaten and what are possible but yet to be perceived or blazed? Through what voice does this visual detail arrive into the story? Is it a dominant narrative voice or a secondary one? Is it one voice or many?

Storytelling 2

(can be combined with #1 or done separately)

Retell a borrowed story. Include a single scene of explicit and even excessive soft focus (either the narrator's or a character's). If hard focus is the eagle-eye search for a particular detail, soft focus is more peripheral and less interested in actionable intelligence. Soft focus lets the image come to the eyes. It is patient, perhaps passive, perhaps meditative. Consider a few different places in the overall timeline of the story where this scene of soft focus might occur. How does it inflect the rest of the telling? What changes based on where you place it in the telling?