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# The Flow of Art: A Study on the Human Experience and Nature

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The Flow of Art:  
A Study on the Human Experience and Nature

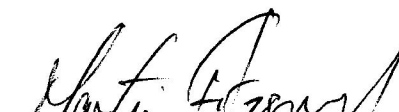
By

Matthew Schott


An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Fine and Performing Arts Scholars Program  
Honors College  
East Tennessee State University

  
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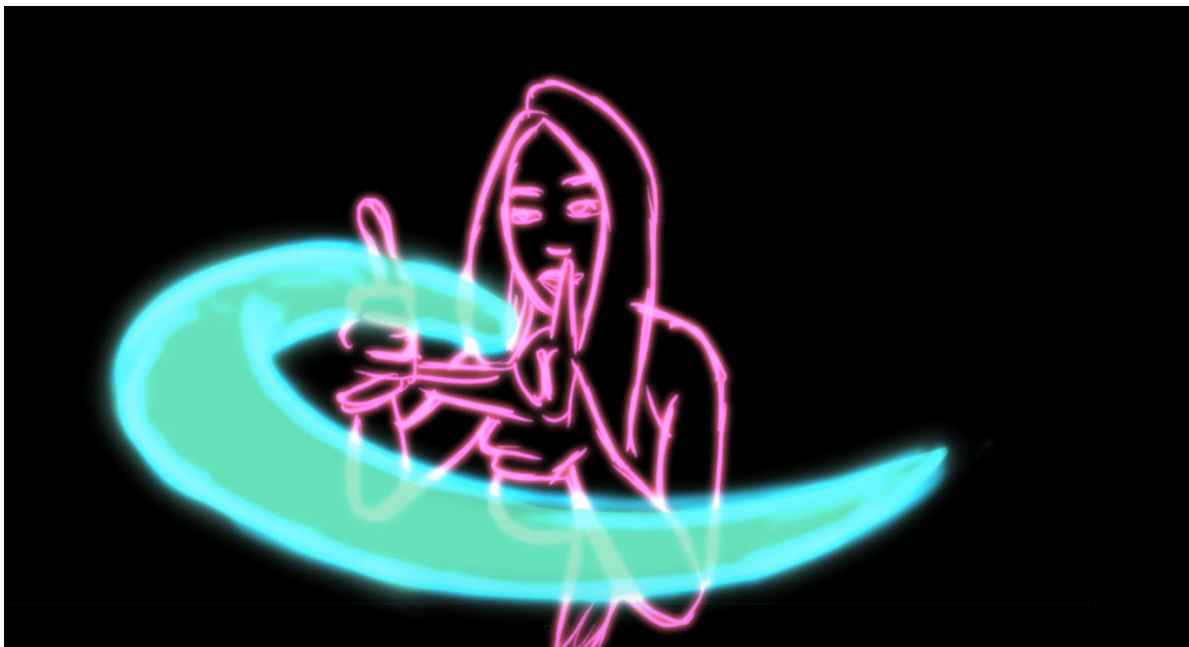
To me, flow is the moment of pure creativity that comes without having to think about the next move. It is the freedom and ability to create a world that only the particular artist can imagine and step into. This feeling of divine inspiration has been recorded throughout all of human history, and has been called many names by some of the greatest minds ever to exist. In order to achieve this state of flow, one usually requires a high level of skill and practice in the specific medium along with the proper motivation or passion. Through this balance of skill and love for the art, one can achieve a sense of great euphoria that only can come from creating something truly special. This urge to create is what has inspired me so heavily for my thesis project. When in the state of flow, the creator and their universe become one, outside distractions recede and they are fully open to the act of creating. Since flow is so essential to creativity and the well-being of so many aspects of life, from sports, to music, science, religion, spirituality, and even sexuality, I felt it necessary to try and visualize it to the best of my ability. When exploring the human experience of flow, I like to think about the cycle of knowledge and creativity. This cycle is one that is exclusive to humans as we have the unique ability to learn from our failure and become inspired to innovate. This pattern of both preservation and innovation has led to the fantastic world of talented artists we know today. In order to create my visual representation of flow, I observed at how it is connected with humanity through the mind, body, and soul, as well as its ties with nature.

The first connection between flow and humanity to explore is through the mind. When conceptualizing how I wanted to visualize the phenomena of flow through art, I started by thinking of where flow is seen in the world and how it has been seen by the minds of various artists. I imagined everything from the neurons in our brain sending signals to each other, to the

formation of beautiful spiral galaxies. Looking at these vastly different areas, I couldn't come to a decision on how to represent flow the best. Artist, Robert Genn said, "The centipede has rhythm and flow in its hundred legs precisely because it does not have to think about it. Consider this the next time you move the instruments of your art." As I pondered over these words, I realized that I had to get outside of my own head and let the initial idea come to me. As I began to become frustrated, I went outside to listen to music and hula hoop as I normally do when I hit a creative block. Though it sounds childish, hooping has been an amazing tool of inspiration and enlightenment for this project and myself. I was looking for a song, and it suddenly came to me that the act of hooping represented my flow the best. The ability to freely express oneself through their craft is exactly the feeling I carry with me when I'm in my plastic circle. It may just seem like a toy, but in my experience it became a solid foundation for my thoughts on the concept of flow and how to further approach it.

Continuing with my research, I discovered that I also had a desire to not only represent my definition of flow, but others as well. I wanted to take a variety of others that shared a similar passion for hooping and translate their flow into a visual story about the unity and beauty of flow. I began to search for several 'flow artists' that stood out, not only because of their technical skill, but for their individual perspectives on flow shown in the way they move. Through various perceptions, such as those common in people with low latent inhibitions, one can endure a constant flow of stimulation to the brain as well the ability to drift into motionless thought. This "spaciness" is caused by the brain's attempt to focus on the incoming information, which in turn causes temporary motor function autonomy and inability to communicate through traditional means. Usually, this state lasts up to a few seconds or minutes, but some can utilize it freely to

think more deeply. I quickly realized I wasn't the only one experiencing this sensation, and to my surprise I found a group of amazing dancers from around the world to work with. These were the people I was after when on my search for those that represented flow. Through exploring these differing points of view of thought, I came up with a strong basis for how I wanted to achieve my project goals.



The next connection to explore, is through the physiological experience of flow. An important aspect to look at when talking about flow in physical art, is the fact that each medium has a unique feel. For example, through my studies I have discovered pottery and sculpting requires peace of mind and a gentle touch, as it is very difficult if one is frustrated or emotionally unbalanced. Painting, on the other hand can be expressive and colorful, as it is fueled by emotion, which makes for more freedom when creating. However, the two mediums that I found provide the most versatility when creating are dance and animation.

To me, dance has become about communicating how I observed the world in the most universal way possible. Dancing is the sketch, or the first draft when I am considering a new project. It allows for spontaneity when creating, forcing one to detach from their current worries and focus on what feels right. As such, I felt it was right to make the flow of dance the foundation of my thesis. Flow is associated with dance in reference to the elegance or grace of one's movement. However, in other cases, flow in dance can simply refer to the linearity of the sequence itself, or the seamless overlap of various shapes made by the body. A dancer that is aesthetically appealing normally has a distinctive flow to their movement, and appears as if they are floating on water, with one move seamlessly falling into the next. Trying to include this aspect of overlapping action and follow-through in my animation was exceptionally difficult. Although dance is an intense activity, an experienced dancer gives the impression that it is effortless. Observing some of the best dancers in film or stage history, such as Gene Kelly or even the modern master, Travis Wall, I saw in their forms a very sophisticated way of creating both spontaneity and perfection. When working with the dancers I chose, I really tried to push their forms and exaggerate their unique movement as much as I could. Paying attention to the

lines of action and poses was especially important during the stage of illustrating the dancers themselves.



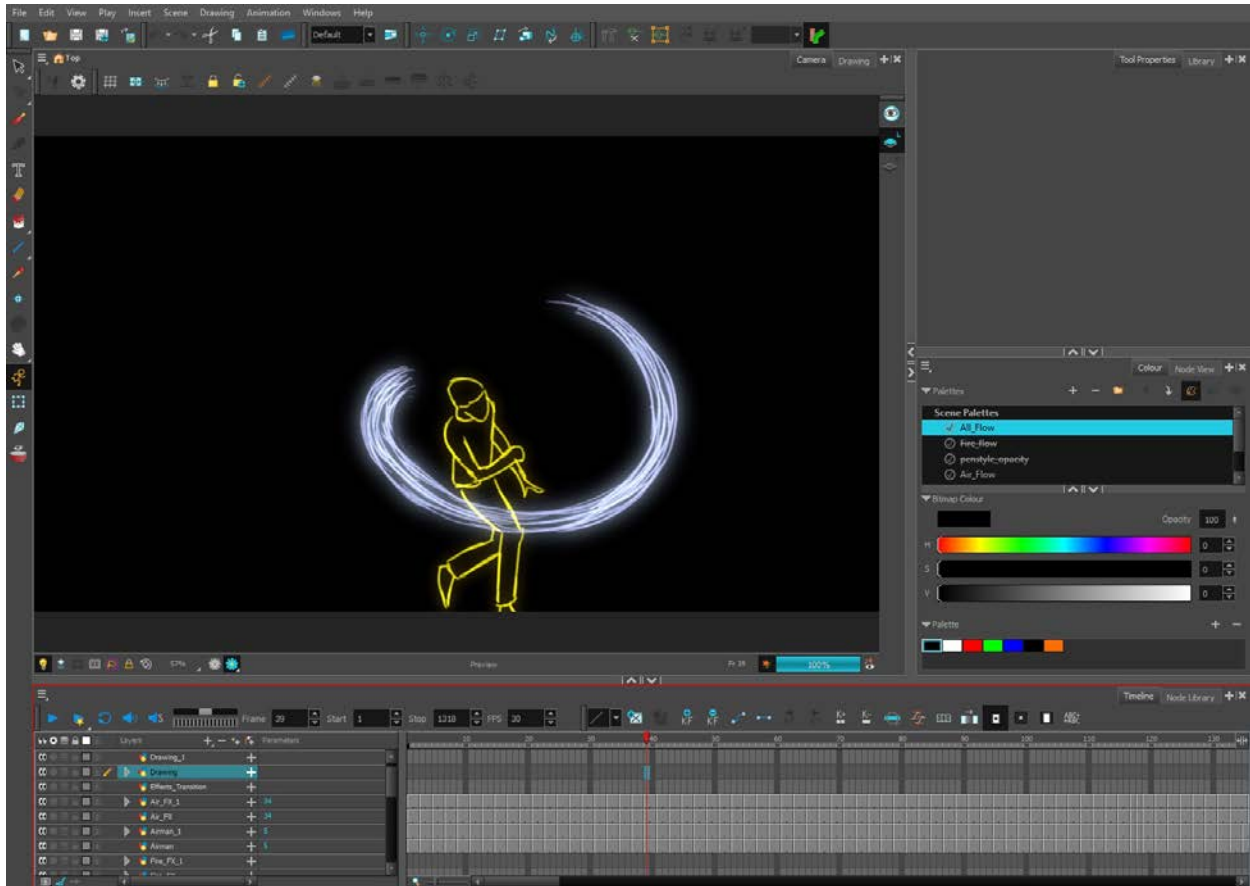
Animation allows for the same spontaneity and perfection, but requires much more focus on multiple aspects at a time, such as the 12 principles of animation, story/character development, design, etc. It also requires more time to achieve a final result due to all the

variables. This makes it a useful tool for creating a polished and detailed work of art. Through combining the knowledge of all my practiced mediums and using it while I'm animating, I am also able to utilize an endless source of inspiration. The only way to explain the ability to breathe life into my art through animation is at the very least a bone-tingling sensation. I believe that the principles of animation and artistic experimentation were heavily rooted in my upbringing. As a result of this allowance, I developed a great foundation for traditional handmade art. As I began this project I constantly debated on how to blend these worlds together, until I saw the animated short *Thought of You* by Ryan Woodward. Woodward said, "I love hand drawn animation. There is a life too it, and it's not a mathematical algorithm that computes it, there are mistakes." Another body of work that heavily influenced my creative choices was *Duet* by Glen Keane. These outstanding works of art perfectly fused dance, creative effects, and animation in a way that moved me to my core. I will forever be inspired by these two animated shorts, and strive to reach a similar level at some point in my career.

During the process of actually creating the animation I decided to use the software, Toon Boom Harmony. The program itself allows for a wide variety of simple effects, along with a layout that was fairly easy to navigate, making it a perfect new tool to utilize during the animation process. I also needed footage of each of the dancers to base my animations on and use for the keyframes. I acquired these by having each of the individuals I was working with make a video of themselves "flowing". After acquiring these videos, I imported each into the animation software, however I did not know at the time that iPhones record at 30 frames per second. Unaware of this, I ended up animating my first element fully at 30 fps. I then decided to "go with the flow" as it was and proceeded to change my original plans to animate at the usual



24 fps. After importing the videos, I used the image from about every tenth frame and slightly made exaggerations in order to create my keyframe animation line art. Finishing up the line art of the animated characters, I had little reference for the effects animation. I then went out and found examples of all the components, such as a crackling fire or running water. Using these, I added additional layers of smaller effects to improve its readability.



Some mediums in art, such as dance or music tend to have an extra element in order to convey the heart-altering message they do. This leads me into my discussion on the soul of humanity. Logic cannot explain this part of creation, as it more revolves around belief and emotion. Soul is what moves others, and has the ability to unify people. It is the fuel to the furnace of creation, and is needed in order to inflict change. This factor tends to be far more

prominent in that of the artistic community, as opposed to more scientific/research-based groups. In my post production stage, it was most appropriate to approach the final touches with as much soul as possible. Through using glows and subtle, yet vibrant color I attempted to achieve an ethereal quality to my line work. This process of including one's unique soulful touch gives purpose to art. "Art holds out the promise of inner wholeness," wrote Alain de Botton in the book, *Art as Therapy*. Many artists have searched for enlightenment through the use of art, as it is known to nourish the spirit and soul. One of the most influential publications on the soul of art came in 1910, when legendary Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art — an exploration of the deepest and most authentic motives for making art*. He explains that this "internal necessity" impels artists to create, and audiences to admire art as a spiritual hunger. This trade of spiritual nourishment is exactly what artists strive to achieve most of their life. To be able to fulfill not only one's self, but of those around you is the definition of art and is the nature of an artist.

When exploring the relationship of flow in art and nature, a body of work I found that exceeds at representing it is the Nickelodeon television show, *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. *The Last Airbender* is among the top echelon of examples that represent flow through the mind, body, soul, and the natural world. This show combines a seamless plot, amazing musical score, character development and awe inspiring animation, which brings both Eastern and Western art together in a way that hasn't been done. Through the study of both martial arts and the four elements, *the Last Airbender* achieved a wonderfully refreshing sense of balance and unity. When deciding on what to animate, it became clear to me that I wanted to use this show as one of my main inspirations. In one of my favorite scenes, during the second season of the show, the

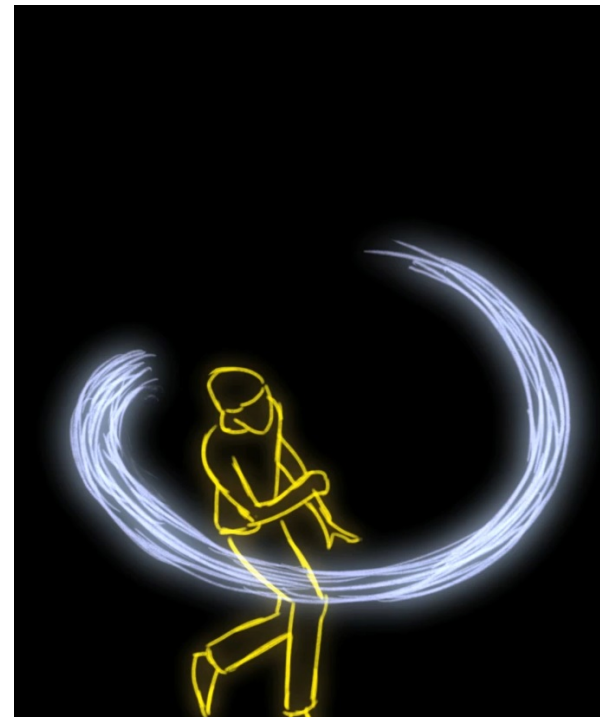
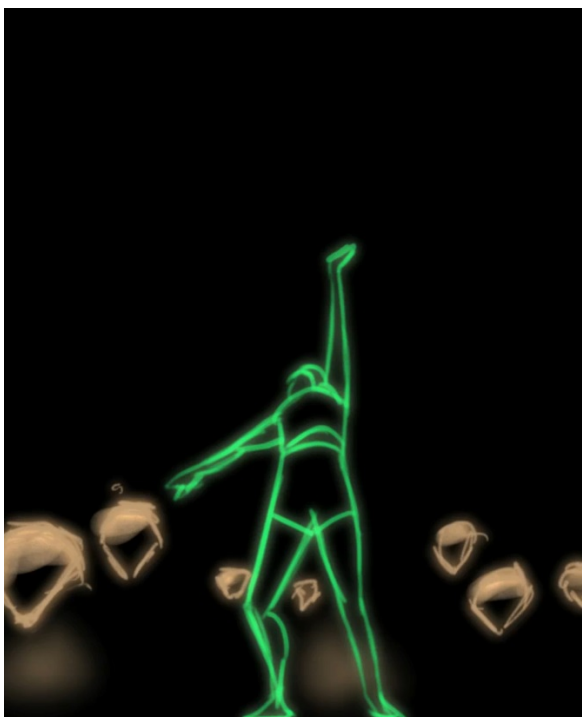
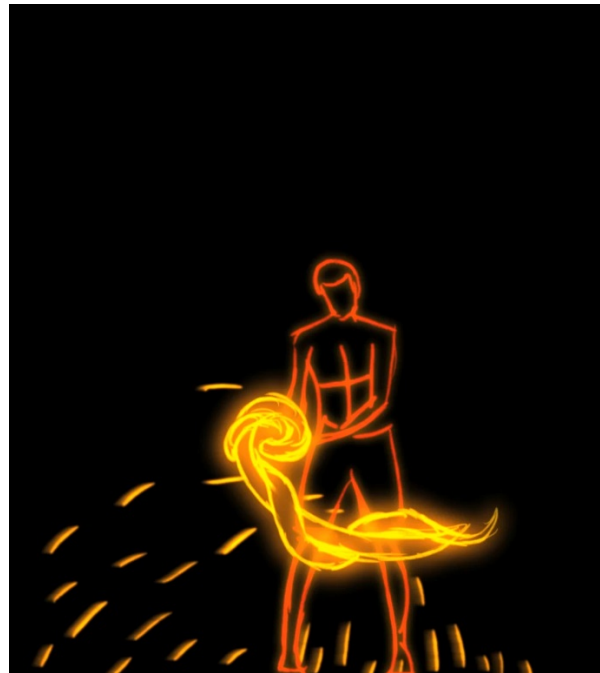
wise uncle Iroh teaches his nephew about the connection between people and the four elements. The uncle tells him, “It is important to draw wisdom from many different places. If we take it from just one place, it becomes rigid and stale”. This scene was the basis for my way of thinking about flow in the four elements and nature itself.



When approaching what I was going to be animating, I had no clue I was going to choose the four elements. My initial plan was to only convey water, for its obvious connections to flow, but I thankfully decided on the four elements after considering the wise words of the aforementioned uncle Iroh. I knew I wanted to include the concept of the four elements with movement, but did not know how to achieve such a feat. After a while of searching, I found that hooping and other ‘flow arts’ have become widely more popular in recent years as more of the modern generation are finding ways to further express themselves through movement and art. This particular type of dance had a very obvious connection with the natural world as well, considering the consistency of the circular form in nature itself.

As I started with my research on the elements, I found that animating each one, along with the characters was going to require a different way of thinking and a vast amount of time. For each piece, I had to not only think about the specific element that was being represented, but

the emotion and behavior linked with them. This was difficult at first, especially while trying to match styles in between each piece in order to create seamless transitions. Another part of my research was going out to experience nature, observing how the elements behaved and how each contributes to the cycle of creation.



Fire is about the birth of energy and power. It is chaotic, wild, and can easily be destructive. I chose my friend and fellow dancer, Mikee Buado. Fire is the element that is often associated with anger and passion. Conveying this in animation was difficult, until I thought of how fire represents the heart of the people in a lot of ancient cultures. It is seen as a source of life and the spirit of humanity. Keeping this in mind while animating, I tried to achieve an effect of the fire staying centralized around the character and almost wrapping him. I also used less frames in between each other at the beginning and more toward the end to accentuate the gaining of energy. In my research, I also observed the tendency of fire to not conform to an exact shape and break apart into sparks. Considering the flares and sparks associated with fire, I had to add an additional layer of small, but detailed effects animation.

Air is the element of freedom and deals with the release of energy. As far as flow in performance, it allows for careless expression and the joy of weightlessness. For this part of the short, I observed another amazing dancer, Josh Phillipi. As it is the most graceful of the elements, I decided to animate this particular scene with less in-between frames for both the character and the effects, so it appears slower and smoother than that of the other elements. The style I chose for this particular piece was mainly based around line art that wasn't bound by the conservation of volume or momentum. In addition, for this particular work, I tried to incorporate more of the entire frame, giving a more open or full feeling. Finally, I included dust clouds being blown about in order to exaggerate its effect on its environment.

Water is the element of change and fluidity. For this part I chose the performer, Alia Hoops to represent water. Much like her flow, water is calm naturally but can quickly adapt and

become fierce. It is also based around the redirection or redistribution of energy. For this, as far as the physics goes, I had to mainly focus on the conservation of mass and momentum. When thinking about how to animate the element itself, I had to take into account the tendency for water to both squash and stretch. This also happens to be the first of the twelve principles of animation that every animator has to be taught. When approaching how I was going to visualize the element, I thought about a really elastic ball, to start off. I then imagined the ball swing around in a circle stretching and leaving a trail behind it. I then had to add more layers of effects for when the water separates or splashes. Along with this, I attempted to give the character a ground by drawing another layer of ripple effects beneath her feet. This also gave the appearance that she is dancing on top of water. The girl herself proved to be one of my most difficult challenges in this project, considering the amount of line work included in her dress and long hair. I had to spend a lot more time on her scene because of this, and the fact that I mainly animated her at the full 30 frames per second, while I animated the effects at only about half that amount. This element was definitely one of my favorites to animate, as I really enjoyed the overlapping action and speed changes that the flow of water achieves so well.

The element, earth, is rooted in stability and strength. For this element, I used the awe-inspiring dancer known as Dizzy Dynamic. Her flow contained a decent amount of strong force and control being used, which inspired my decision. Being the most stubborn of all the elements, earth deals with the storage and stagnation of energy. This was the last element I chose to animate, as it is my natural opposite to be controlled and immovable like earth. While animating this section, I wanted to make the energy of the dancer appear to slow down, like walking in mud, so I transitioned into a lower frame-rate as the scene went along. I also tried to convey the

concept of unity by showing the element breaking apart at times and coming back together. In addition, I added clouds of dust to accentuate the force of the rocks going in and out of the ground. Trying to still portray a state of flow but also the rigidity of earth itself proved by far to be the most challenging.

Through all of human history, artists and other creators have been able to access the extraordinary state of flow to achieve amazing feats. Whether it be for a divine purpose, or simply making someone's day a little better, art has been used to lift the spirits and nourish the soul of humanity. In our attempt to cope with the world in which we live, we have found this great mental resource, that has allowed for achievements that not one person could not attain on their own. In my observation, I have seen this euphoric cycle of flow change the lives of so many and provide the tools necessary to reach one's full potential, and am thoroughly honored with the opportunity to visualize such a force. Through my experience and research on how I created a visual representation of the concept of flow using dance, animation, and the four elements as my inspiration, I found an overwhelming sense of awareness and fulfillment.

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