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Derek Whitehead  
dhw@westnet.com.au

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## Artist's Labor

*Derek Whitehead*

### Abstract

This essay explores the relations between perception, phenomenology and art practice. The object of my inquiry is the kind of perceptual repertoire available to the artist in relation to his art, which extends beyond the technical means available to art making in its varying forms. I invoke an artist's innate perception as the source and locus of art's creation. This creation of art also has an outward or phenomenological dimension. In this respect, I investigate the ways in which phenomenological perception, via Maurice Merleau-Ponty's hermeneutic insights into artistic activity, might offer to contemporary arts practice a means of reappraising its thoughts and actions. Here I propose the artist as one who embodies and uncovers artistic sensation: something which is embedded in an artist's working consciousness. In addition, I evaluate the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's perception into art might revivify an artist's laboring body in the formative conditions of artistic expression and how such expression might be instructive for aestheticians in the analysis they bring to art-making itself.

### Key Words

art practice, Merleau-Ponty, perception, phenomenology, the artist's body, the body

### 1. Introduction

In this essay I am primarily engaged with the treatment of themes pertinent to aesthetics and contemporary art practice from a phenomenological perspective. However, in the course of my inquiry I will not propose any lessons to be learned from phenomenology, which artists might then, peradventure, put into practice. Nor will I persuade aestheticians of the necessity of defining a standard position, analytical, hermeneutical or otherwise, in regard to art practice. That is to say, I will not propose what artists should or should not do in their art to satisfy the claims of those outside their profession. Nor need artists be placed in the incongruous position of having to account for their art in ways removed from its medium and making. The artist, it may be said, is the sole authority for his or her work; the artist alone can act independently of aesthetic judgments about it.

This being said, and in assaying Merleau-Ponty's perception into art, I offer a mode of interaction and exchange with the art practices of our times. Divergent as these practices are, it is my wish to contribute to an understanding of the present-day phenomena of art through a kind of Merleau-Pontean prism, to see the extent an artist's perceptual practice may be illuminated by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological aesthetics in an increasingly heterodox environment for creative thought and practice. Ideally, and from an artist's standpoint, art is concerned with the communication of internalized responses to outward reality, responses which remain untranslatable other than in created terms. Art is created out of an artist's

perceptual faculty, and seeks outward expression in created form, in works of art. We say 'works of art' as if art itself were some mysterious terrain from which, with the artist's divination, art's workings somehow come into being.

Moreover, in aesthetic circles it is customary to think that art is the outward expression or representation of an artist's inner world, or of some indefinable aspect or feature of this world which, if it were not for the powers of artistic expression or the persuasions of aesthetic judgment, would have no real means of commending itself to human appreciation. That art has an outward or phenomenological dimension would seem to lend itself to aesthetic inquiry. But what place has phenomenological inquiry in the discipline of art-making? Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, a recent contributor to *Contemporary Aesthetics*, observed that both phenomenology and art propose an account of time, space and the world in which we live "as we *live* them."<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, if art is one very specialized mode of personal and cultural address, then it seems reasonable to consider whether the insights of phenomenology might offer to present-day art practitioners a deeper insertion in/with their practices. In this respect, my aim is to explore Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insights into bodily perception, and artistic perception, more especially. Here, my underlying premise is that the artist is one who embodies and uncovers artistic sensation, something which is embedded in an artist's working consciousness.

In this respect, a strong contrast may be drawn between the considered consciousness of an artist and the hyperactivity of much of our contemporary age, an age characterized by an escalating incidence in the virtual and the hyper-real, forces which challenge artistic agency and its affective values, bodily processes and forms. The response to such a challenge lies in the character of our aesthetic intelligence, that is, in our ability to recognize the ambiguities and opportunities in the contemporary situation so as to affirm our interdependency as thinkers and makers in the realm of created meaning. What is required of our thinking is a clarification of origins for thought and practice at the level of human symbolic exchange, the kind of interchange which takes place when aesthetic inquiry turns intently toward artistic practice in order to learn from it.

Therefore, in examining the phenomena which art can bring forward for critical reflection, I will draw on Merleau-Ponty's direct engagement with the materials, skills and formal values of the artist's profession. Merleau-Ponty addresses the artist in material action. Thus, the very making of art enables the artist to transmute perceptions into objects and ideas into practices. Let us see, then, how the practices of bodily and artistic perception come into play.

## **2. The Body and Perception**

It is significant that Merleau-Ponty wanted his phenomenology to be imbued with a new ontology of vision. In contrast to the "confessional self-transparency" of Sartre, Martin Jay declares, Merleau-Ponty's fascination with perception and the visual is "[a] heroic attempt to reaffirm the nobility of vision on new and firmer grounds than those provided by the discredited Cartesian perspectivalist tradition."<sup>[2]</sup> With such a project in view, Merleau-Ponty argues for the necessity of a return to

ontological questioning and its ramifications: to the subject-object question, the question of intersubjectivity and the question of Nature. Merleau-Ponty proposes an outline of his ontology projected as an ontology "of brute Being and of logos," and argues that an *Ursprungsklarung*, an originary clarification, is required that attests to our incarnate subjectivity within the *Lebenswelt* (the Life-World). He stresses that a subjectivity and an intersubjectivity must be reached which enjoys "both solidity and completeness in the mode of the *Lebenswelt*."<sup>[3]</sup>

What is also affirmed is the expression of the human body as a *lebewesen*, a living creature, in all its enfleshed totality. Moreover, in seeking after the nature of visible things, we tend to rely on the structural components of our perception, as did the Gestaltists, who embarked on research into what they described as the circular, interactional character of sense experience, an approach which Merleau-Ponty thinks is more sensitive to "the acting mind," as distinct from the intellectualist categories of the neo-Kantians.<sup>[4]</sup> The essential relational structures of perception and expression are identified by Merleau-Ponty as necessary sources for critical reflection, for they propose new horizons onto the nature of creative subjectivity and a renewed focus on the elements which constitute the expressive life.

In this respect, Merleau-Ponty speaks of something that underlies our perception and expression, as well as undergirding all our conceptualizations of the observable world: a "primordial (or primary) order of signification." The phenomenal structures we see about us are not independent of our own "constitutive powers"<sup>[5]</sup>, for they appear in the organic history of humankind. These constitutive powers have creative potential. According to Merleau-Ponty, the world of bodily being is governed by the relations of perception and expression. Such relations give us access to human subjectivity, and to the elements of expressive life. We are thus called to what Terry Eagleton describes as the fleshly self: ". . .to the situated, somatic, incarnate nature of being."<sup>[6]</sup> Merleau-Ponty envisions what I would call, a schematic ontological aesthetics: an account of *aisthēsis* and its material substantiations, whereby the body is incarnated in the world in such a way that sensory experience is predicated upon it as an embodied entity. This embodiment involves the twofold dynamic of perception and expression. Moreover, it is in the operation of expression itself, Merleau-Ponty says, and "begun in the least perception," which "amplifies into . . . art."<sup>[7]</sup> It is this which constitutes the *force majeure* of artistic exertion, this tripartite relation of perception, expression and creation.

What is interesting is that which lies before expression and sustains it from behind. Expressible meaning, if I may so put it, is the articulation of what sustains expression behind the constructions of workaday consciousness. Moreover, it is these insights into the nature of the body, and the sensations associated with perceptual practice, that distinguishes "the artist's vocation" in the world. Further, the laboring body is what characterizes an artist's being-in-the-world. Expressing what exists is an endless task, Merleau-Ponty says, a task which is attributed to the artist who, to an exemplary degree,

is capable of penetrating to the sources of things beneath their surface appearances.<sup>[8]</sup>

Certain questions arise for us at this point, and artists or viewers may be inclined to give their own responses. What connections or dissimilarities might there be between the body, your body and the bodily existence of an artist? What distinguishes the artist, whose body is interconnected with the world, from the bodies of other people? Is the artist's body more deeply connected, or are artists connected to the world in different ways than others? If artists are more connected, what accounts for the difference? What kind of interconnections might there be between artists and viewers? What unique abilities do artists possess, and what responsibilities do artists have given their abilities?

First, it is worth noting that in his essay "The Artist's Body," Merleau-Ponty gives us an image of an artist's body within a milieu of interactive corporeality. He declares that the artist takes his body with him. He writes, "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world" into works of art. Moreover, he writes, ". . . to understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body, [to] that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement."<sup>[9]</sup> This overlapping of vision and movement is central to Merleau-Ponty, in that it situates the body - the living and enacting body - in the drama of sentient life. But where does the artist take his body? He takes it into the world, and before the world of his work.

More generally, if our body is a visible entity in the world, such that we "steer it through the visible," as Merleau-Ponty declares, then the body is a part of the visible order within a constituted whole. Merleau-Ponty continues, "Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself [which means] the world is made of the same stuff as the body."<sup>[10]</sup> Here, Merleau-Ponty writes that things and the body share the same elemental constitution, whereby things find their repetition in the body by some sort of secret visibility.

Indeed, for the artist at this point, and for Paul Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty declares, "Nature is on the inside." As Hugh Silverman also argues, Merleau-Pontean vision, understood here in terms of visibility, is "nature at work." Whence, such things as "quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them."<sup>[11]</sup> And, we might say, an artist such as Cézanne welcomes them to a superlative degree.

Moreover, one way of distinguishing the artist's vocation from non-artists, that is, the artist's particular bodily vision and orientation, is to say that the artist gives him- or herself over to the work at hand, to the conception and realization of a material work of art. What distinguishes the artist's perceiving body from the rest of us? One thing can be said: An artist's vision is not a view superimposed on an outside, as with most non-artists who naturally construct the world from a central

focus of the self; neither is an artist's perception a mere physical-optical relation with the world. Indeed, "the world no longer stands before [the artist] through representation"; instead "it is the [artist] to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible."<sup>[12]</sup> This is so for Merleau-Ponty because things have an internal equivalent in the body. But in the case of artists, these inner equivalencies give rise to a second order of the visible, shapes or images, in that an icon or essence appears which represents the first or primal order of things in creative action.

What abilities do artists possess here, and what responsibilities do they have? Merleau-Ponty says that it is the artist to/within whom the things of this world give birth by a sort of self-forming of the visible. It is as if this first-order of the visible arises internally within the artist's consciousness, only to be projected back again among outward realities. But even where the world no longer stands before the artist through representation, an artist's representations in created work, whether literal or abstract, are never in their essence merely representations of reality. Thus artistic representations are unique among human representations, in that an artist's work must faithfully correspond with reality as he perceives and experiences it, and must create something within/from reality, even a totally new reality, in all its varied intensities.

### 3. Vision and Making Visible

Merleau-Ponty believes that an artist's vision "learns only by seeing and learns only from itself." The artist's vision is a schooling in seeing. In this, the artist remains a student of his own work. Moreover, the artist is one who is animated by the very inadequacies which "keep [or prevent] the world from becoming [a work of art],"<sup>[13]</sup> and by the very possibility of their transformation, as Merleau-Ponty has poignantly said. This suggests that an artist is charged with the work of restoration: with restoring the world (to itself, to us) through the transmutations of his or her eye and hand. What unfolds here are very pertinent abilities and responsibilities taken on by the artist, for such transmutations are made intelligible through the exigencies of created work. But what are these urgencies of created work, and how might they influence the viewer's perception?

Speaking concretely, once a created work of art has left the solitude of the studio for a more public space, it may still pose resistances to our thought, still insist on withholding its sight, its secrets, from view. Here, we advert to the secret incipience (or birth) of things in a work, things which solicit us through our perception. Correspondingly, there is also the secret genesis of things in an artist. For, as Paul Klee once declared, "[T]he artist does nothing other than gather and pass on what comes to him from the depths. He neither serves nor rules - he transmits." For Klee, that which comes to an artist from the depths - from his own interiority - culminates in creative transmission, another feature which distinguishes itself from non-artistic activity. In his *Creative Credo*, Klee's concern is "not to reproduce the visible but to render visible"; that is, to articulate the remote starting-point of creation: the beginnings of supernal things in consciousness.<sup>[14]</sup>

Something of this potent encounter with the depths is also evoked by the artist Max Ernst, when he writes: "Just as the role of the poet [consists in writing under] what articulates itself in him, the role of the [artist] is to grasp and project what is seen in him."<sup>[15]</sup> Wieland Schmied has said that Ernst's concern was with a "mechanism of inspiration," the aim of which was to discover "a method of establishing a poetic objectivity;" that is to say, to "banish reason, taste and conscious will from the making of the work of art," and for the purpose of producing works that "are never consequences, final [or] unavoidable." Instead, such works "[remain] open, they are proposals, methods, [and] processes."<sup>[16]</sup> Ernst believed that the artist grasps and projects what is seen in him, perhaps something which sees itself in him, and which must therefore show itself in, through and for him.

Works of art produced in this way are provisional, but also consequential, processes of an artist's ongoing discoveries. For if the poet gives voice to what articulates itself in him, as if by some mute divination, then the poet, and the artist, are similarly drawn to what W. S. Di Piero has called, "image-making activities," "ways of working materials." A painter's material really is *material*, as Di Piero rightly says. Poets "do thought work and make thought things." Moreover, "[the] sensation of bringing a poem into existence is so much like the imaginative exertion of making a physical image that poetry, in its becoming, aspires finally to the manifest and sumptuous imperfectabilities of painting and sculpture."<sup>[17]</sup> Ernst's and Di Piero's emphasis on what must be grasped and projected from within an artist shows a certain compulsion felt by the artist that must find its own inscrutable way toward realization.

To speak of an artist's perception is to approach a mode of seeing and sensing which is characterized by the relations of surface and depth. That is to say, such relations celebrate what Merleau-Ponty calls an enigma, that of visibility itself. An enigma is a puzzling thing, a riddle or a paradox. How does he defend this? To see is ". . . to have at a distance," Merleau-Ponty says. To see is to have or possess things at a distance; that is to say, the way in which we observe things at a distance brings them into focus for us. But depth is both "distance and proximity," for Merleau-Ponty. Depth is the means by which we have access to a visible world, but only because depth is concealed from us. Depth is the unnoticed background to all our seeing. In a word, for Merleau-Ponty, depth, is always the dimension of the hidden. To see ordinarily is to apprehend the surfaces of things, not their depth. But to see from the viewpoint of perspective implies depth: depth at a distance, depth as distance. If this is true for our ordinary seeing, then the artist is one who strives to capture something of depth's inarticulate possession of visible things, revealing their qualities in the gestures and representations of created work.<sup>[18]</sup>

A question arises. Do Klee and Ernst embody the kind of artistic labor which a phenomenological account of art practice suggests is able to influence our perceptions of and within the world? Are there those who fail to influence perception in this way?

In reply, we should never undervalue the artist's particular

labor and study, Merleau-Ponty says, that labor which is "so like an effort of thought and which allows us to speak of a language of [art]."<sup>[19]</sup> Such an effort of thought enables the artist to enter what André Malraux has called "another world." But for Merleau-Ponty entry to another world means that world which the artist sees and which speaks his language, but also one that is freed from the anonymous weight which holds it back and keeps it equivocal.<sup>[20]</sup> For how could an artist or poet do anything other than express his or her engagement with the world. Thus the creative impulse always communicates something. Such communication "is a new system of equivalencies which demands [a] particular upheaval, and it is in the name of a truer relation between things that their ordinary ties are broken."<sup>[21]</sup> However, Paul Crowther may be correct in his view that for Merleau-Ponty to describe the artist's creative communication as one of "equivalencies" is to underestimate the artist's "deviations from perceptual norms," or their possibility, in the fuller articulation of a work. Such equivalencies, Crowther argues, are a voicing of Andre Malraux's "coherent deformations"<sup>[22]</sup> in which the artist, through a given medium, brings to a fuller recognition those forms that solicit his or her perception.

If the breaking of the ordinary ties between things is in the interests of a truer harmonization, then this has compositional force for the artist. Here we recognize Merleau-Ponty's sense that the artist is one for whom the objects of the world give birth by a concentrated coming-to-itself of the visible. For example, the combination of simultaneous views of a given object, as in Cubist abstraction, do more than constitute a pictorial analytic statement. What we look at in a Cubist work is a field of properties: a distribution of color, texture and form. What I see in such a work is an arrangement of elements, not identifiable things, but things without their skin. Here an artist may take ordinary things -- domestic objects, for instance -- and recast their outward appearances into non-representational forms. Equally, an artist may be simply enthused with fashioning and contemplating the forms themselves, with no reference to, or inspiration from, ordinary things in themselves.

However, for Merleau-Ponty, a truer relation between things is in the interests of a vision which has become finally free. Such freedom "throws out of focus and regroups objects of the world for the [artist] and words for the poet." But throwing out of focus and regrouping the objects of a world is not a freedom readily achieved. Rather, it is rather like the bequeathing of "new organs for a new task."<sup>[23]</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, then, it is merely that "an artist's going further at the moment he creates no longer indicates some reality he must go towards, but rather what still must be done in order to restore the encounter between his glance and the things which solicit it, the encounter between the [artist] who has to be and what exists."<sup>[24]</sup> This active engagement between the artist who has to be and what exists is in a constant state of flux, in that the artist's glance is always approaching things but never fully apprehending them in their inter-sensorial connectedness. Such a glance is drawn back again and again toward the inviolability of things, devoid of their possession.

Perception breaks open the world as a surgeon opens up a

human body, "catching sight of the organs in full functioning, taken in their activity." This is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's "medical gaze," the ways in which a practiced medical eye can judge the character of a bodily malady. Here again perception is not a perception of things, but rather of elements, "of things which are dimensions; I slip on these elements and here I am in the world."<sup>[25]</sup> Similarly, when an artist apprehends the world in the openness of perception, s/he perceives the traits of immediate things. The artist is, like a surgeon, in search of what might be called an unexplained familiar: a sense that there is on this occasion more to this thing or that body than actually meets the eye, of the organs of a thing or body taken in their elemental entirety, the whole portending as yet unrecognized relations.

In this respect Merleau-Ponty speaks of "the perceived thing," the object unfolding before our eyes. Further, the perceived thing, such as a work of art, awaits the kind of response that would receive the diversity of its aspects from other points of view. As Jacques Taminiaux has observed, a perceived thing acquires its unity and identity from the very diversity of its aspects; the unity of the perceived thing springs from this very diversity. Taminiaux comments that the perceived thing "would lose its perceptual density, its incarnated existence, and would cease to be perceived if the aspects that are presented by it did not announce other aspects, which are not yet offered to sight. These latent sides", he says, "form the horizon hidden by the first ones."<sup>[26]</sup> It is the forming of an horizon or purview onto a thing's latent sides which directs an artist to look for those aspects of a thing which are hidden from view as dimensions to be plumbed, the deeper and denser his own perception becomes.

Alongside an object's perceptual density, we strive for an understanding of its incarnate existence. Merleau-Ponty says that we acquire some "sensible understanding", because the perceptual is always given with "sense experience (*le sentir*), with the phenomenal," and with "the silent transcendence." He thus identifies a basic issue for philosophy when it encounters the silent reality of things, when, in fact, it encounters art: "[H]ow every philosophy is language and nonetheless consists in rediscovering silence."<sup>[27]</sup> But in what ways might this expectant openness forged for us by the silent awareness of sensory things be mediated through an artist's bodily practice?

#### **4. The Artist's Body and Contemporary Practice**

One of the complexities embedded in contemporary art practice is precisely how artistic expression can be devoid of *simulacra* - a shadowy likeness, a deceptive substitute, a mere pretence - if Merleau-Ponty's "visible" and its "internal correspondences" have been jettisoned from view. I am thinking of the kind of performance art which immobilizes the body in favor of micro-technical effects, for example, in the works of Australian performing artist, *Stelarc*<sup>[28]</sup>, and other proponents of the body as technologicistic. (See [www.stelarc.com](http://www.stelarc.com).)

Here there is an implicit claim to have enhanced the body's interactive potential through computerized intelligences, where mechanized insertions into an artist's body - the use of electric probes, for instance - mirror or control its movement. Such a

body is a purported site for *praxis*, but there is a danger of reducing this body to a state of passive compliance through simulated methods of cybernetic command. Such a bodily condition suggests, by a kind of subterfuge, what Terry Eagleton questions: "[T]hat the body must be somehow *marked* or *signed* in order to enter narrative, [to] pass from brute fact to active meaning."[\[29\]](#)

Reclaiming the body as an enlivened sensory field would be possible for performance practice if it were once again to enjoin the living body, bringing together the powers of bodily and artistic representation as they combine in an outwardly intelligible communication. Such practice would thus stand instructed about itself by just such a repossession of the conjunction of brute fact and active meaning. Indeed, we see something of the potency of this doubling potential in the vital actualities of mime theatre and dramatic dance, where there is a conscious overlapping of physicality and sensibility. Such engagement, by which an artist's body is moved to a high degree of mental and physical concentration, as in modern dance, is nevertheless as elusive as it is demonstrative, for it both evokes and conceals the body's technical achievements realized through the oscillations of pleasure and pain. Such a schema has parallels with what Merleau-Ponty calls the sensory "in-visible": that aspect of discernable things, including bodily behavior, that is ordinarily concealed from view.

It is necessary to understand what Merleau-Ponty means more precisely by the terms 'visible' and 'in-visible' as they have a direct bearing on human perception. Perceptually speaking, we can identify the sensory visible: the things before our sight, such as other bodies. But there is also the sensory in-visible, phenomenology's invisible lining (or membrane) of the visible. What is more, this in-visible resists our attempts to seize it, Merleau-Ponty suggests. Every attempt to grasp it makes it disappear. The in-visible appears only within the visible, he says. Further, the in-visible inner lining of the visible is the means by which things, including bodies, hold to themselves.

But how, it might be asked, is Merleau-Ponty's in-visible to be apprehended in ways that might illuminate art practice? We have a clue here. The German lyric poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, speaks of an artwork, a visible thing, bearing the very private and intimate singularity of "the one who must make it," the artist. Such a singularity makes its entry so as to "find its justification in the work and reveal the law in it," he writes, "like an inborn drawing that is invisible until it emerges in the transparency of the artistic."[\[30\]](#) We might say, then, that an artwork has an inborn line which is invisible until it issues in the crystal transparency of its image.

This notion of the in-visible may be characterized by art-making in the multiplicity of its signifying practices, practices that draw on an artist's intuitions into the nature of sensory things and that he celebrates as equiprimordial (equal) with thought. As alluded to earlier, Silverman argues that Merleau-Ponty's idea of vision, understood here in terms of visibility, is "nature at work." Thus, he says, our task "is to take thought to the spatiality of vision," a space in which vision "reassumes its fundamental power of showing forth more than itself."[\[31\]](#)

Here it is the privilege of the artist to account for this more-than-itself of vision, its superabundance, in the gratuities of created work. But how might this thrust toward some super-sensible perception find its place in contemporary art-making?

Speaking in the 1980s, Craig Owens once claimed that the postmodern artwork unsettled the stability of "the modernist mastering position"; its authority was not based on its uniqueness or singularity, he said, but on modern aesthetics' attribution of the universal forms "utilized for the representation of vision";<sup>[32]</sup> and this beyond any differences in content due to the production of works in actual historical conditions. Not only does postmodernist work claim no such authority for itself, Owens argued; it is intent on undermining it, hence "its generally deconstructive thrust."<sup>[33]</sup> Here, a deconstructive mechanism introduced into art-making postpones or cancels judgment along Modernist lines.

For its part, contemporary art has moved away from a predominantly conceptual stance to one of avowed public profession. Contemporary artists have been induced to leave the solitude of their studios and engage with the social order. Such artists now deal with a demanding repertoire of social tools and art institutional prerogatives in the exhibition of their work. Contemporary art and its diverse applications have taken on a definable public space. Such space has become the artist's studio *en plein-air*, an overt mode of being and making. Of course, interactivity, which should mean time for people to reflect on what is before them in conducive environs, is axiomatic to the artist who wants to "create an audience," as Paul Klee once remarked. <sup>[34]</sup> However, the attempt to create an audience requires the enactment of a discourse, one which recognizes the artist as mover and shaper of his creations. For, inasmuch as discourse is the articulation of social and cultural forces as they find expression in individual practices, then discourse constitutes a critique of power, whether of art or life.

Nowadays, the evident materiality of an artist's discourse must be allowed to forge open-handed aesthetic values, so that we learn to interrogate those practices that are at odds with themselves, or with the world, and why this may be so.<sup>[35]</sup> Martin Heidegger's intuition, in his *On the Origin of the Work of Art*, which insists on an artwork's "work-being" rather than its "object being," may yet transform our experience of sensory things into visionary engagement, and thus open contemporary art to a more humanizing critical reflection. Whereas our present historical moment is one of conflicted truth and heterogeneous appearances, the contemporary artist is one who remains to mould this world's latent meanings and undisclosed truths.

Moreover, the direction of contemporary media suggests that things, in order to exist, must somehow enter our visibility. Things are said to exist, are called into existence, by a kind of mechanized rationality that adheres to a strictly linear way of thinking. Commentators as diverse as Lyotard, Baudrillard and Silverman have noted that linear rationality remains a priority in the promotion of a kinetic and televisual culture. Here everything must have or be a new means of constructing perception from the standpoint of individualistic consumption.

How, in such circumstances, are artists to reinvigorate the depths underlying ordinary vision? By affirming, in marked contrast to the arbitrary and the simulacral, the contrasting energies of real-time material praxis: of bodies, rhythms and events. Artists can seek a corrective here: an encounter with life that mirrors back to us something of Heidegger's sense of a artwork's "coming-to-presence" and "abiding": of an *earthing* of art amidst the competing forces of politicized visualities.[36]

Contemporary art has a demonstrative physicality, a topography, we might say, in that it writes, maps, or projects itself into material space through eruptive strategies. Much contemporary art is seen as a drive toward obscurity, having a will to enigma, to unintelligibility or to uninterpretability, as Donald Kuspit has claimed.[37] But is this so? Defenders of contemporary art speak of the ways in which assemblage art, installation and multi-media art (video, audio, and film art) and certain modes of performance art manage to instate some guiding motif at the organizational centre of its perceptual field, such that new resonances, balances and tensions emerge, thus saving its composition, or design, as Charles Altieri would have it, from "willfulness" or mere "ornamental status." [38] However, authentic art practice, which demonstrates a will to veracity, is also the practice which finds a legitimate place for the illogical and irrational. Such practice takes our reason and aesthetic judgment to a threshold where artworks take on nonobjective values and unrecognized meanings, demonstrating art's power to work its way through, and often against, the contingent mental spaces of theoretical discourse.

Some contemporary art maps the ways in which heterogeneous elements, found objects, ready-mades and human artifacts operate within some larger enveloping idea, whether in the box-like containments of the Polish artist Mateusz Fahrenholz, for example, or the exploded assemblage environs of the British artist Cornelia Parker. (See websites [www.englishgallery.com/FAHRENHOLZ\\_Mateusz.htm](http://www.englishgallery.com/FAHRENHOLZ_Mateusz.htm) and [www.frithstreetgallery.com](http://www.frithstreetgallery.com) for examples of their work.) For Fahrenholz, it might be said, the space of assemblage is a vehicle for an examination of the objects of domestic attachment transmuted by memory or imagination, while for Parker, found objects and artifacts become the site of a ritually robust profession.[39]

Moreover, the idea of art's space as topological offers us a model for a more reflexive art practice. To produce a work of art is not to produce something from nothing, as Merleau-Ponty insists. A visible work of art, an artwork which is made visible, is but "the trace of a total movement of Speech," he says, and this movement contains the expressive operation (my expression) and that of other artists.[40] This movement gives voice to a performative process, an artist's alignment of materials, energies and sympathies within the paradoxical nature of expression itself. Here, it seems to me, the contemporary artist can begin to work within freely chosen parameters only by occupying some outpost of thought and practice which portends a clearer view. For it is what remains unthought in art, those human realities that art has yet to aspire towards, that poses an existential challenge to art and

its making. Furthermore, contemporary art-making can learn to resist those market forces which promote the coercions of the image as style, an *anti-praxis* of sorts, that is mirrored in the excesses of art theory. By contrast, it is by turning the created image toward its co-constituency in the in-visible, Merleau-Ponty's membrane or inner lining of the visible, that a truer eye will be formed. Such an eye can facilitate our release from perceptual indeterminacy in a revitalized encounter with event and time as we experience them.

## 5. Conclusion and Prognosis

How might some sought-after equality of art and thought work itself out in contemporary terms? Again we turn to philosophy. Philosophy has never spoken of the passivity of our activity, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, because "new as our initiatives may be, they come to birth at the heart of being, [and are] supported on the pivots or hinges of our life, their sense is a 'direction'."<sup>[41]</sup> If this is so, then we have committed ourselves to using the project of an incipient aesthetic, of an access to created things through the solicitations of an artist's eye. Such an eye has the ability to bring the dynamics of the pre-conceptual world, the artist's subconscious image-world, to an indirect insertion among the signs and structures of contemporary living, thus keeping open and poised for hermeneutical evaluation "the hither side of experience," as Merleau-Ponty defines it, that region which is so close or familiar to us as to escape our conscious attention.

Consequently, artistic practice, conceived as an artist's eye placed within depth and among things, fosters for us as viewers a distinct way of being perceptual, of sharing something of the artist's perception in and of the world. Such perception is a counter-dynamic of a significant kind, just as art, historically and contemporaneously, is invariably a counter-dynamic in one way or another. Ideally, a counter-dynamic is a thrust toward, an exigency which fractures open, both dissemblances and obscurities, whether in art or life.

In the final analysis, have Merleau-Ponty's insights into artistic perception offered contemporary arts practice the scope for a necessary reappraisal of itself? Here, the main point about contemporary art is that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of art-making remains viable and efficacious, even when considering the different technologies employed by artists in their work, though it may be surmised that artists, according to ability, inclination or commitment, engage with the rigors of creative bodily practice in varying degrees. However, it is not a question of who or what may be deviating from authenticity in this regard: authenticity will mean different things to different people. It is more an issue of recognizing what the personalized perceptions and intuitions actually are that guide and sustain artists in their daily working lives. While not drawing any concluding evaluative judgments about what constitutes authentic art practice in this respect, for much art these days is deliberately open-ended, it may reasonably be said that in delineating the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can be understood and applied to investigating the bodily being and creative processes of an artist, some keener light is undoubtedly shed on the dynamics and direction of modern art and, by imaginative extension, the

contemporary art of our own times.

This essay has argued that, while practicing artists have grounds for reservation about the applicability of aesthetic theory to their discipline, Merleau-Ponty does illuminate artistic consciousness to a compelling degree, and to this extent his perceptions into art have the capacity to revivify an artist's sentient awareness in and through creative expression. His specific approach to the body, and more especially, to the artist's body, encourages us as artists and non-artists to be more attuned to one another in our search for clarity, meaning and beauty in the formative conditions of artistic expression and aesthetic investigation. Phenomenological inquiry may thus be seen as an important way of opening up renewed dialogue with contemporary art practices, emboldening the artist's eye to engage more fully with the forces of contemporary culture in interrogatory and restitutive terms.

Will such an eye be forged for creative practices in our times? Only in so far as the subjects of such an eye compose the artist's eye in the making of his or her own work.

### Endnotes

[1] Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, "[Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic](#)," in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 3, 2005.

[2] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 298.

[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed., Claude Lefort (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 165-167.

[4] Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p.301.

[5] Jay, *Downcast Eye*, p. 302.

[6] Terry Eagleton, "Body Work," in *The Eagleton Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan, (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 160.

[7] Merleau-Ponty, , *The Prose of the World*, ed., Claude Lefort, trans., John O'Neill (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1969/1973), p. 83.

[8] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.169.

[9] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p.162.

[10] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p.163.

As of the world, so of the fabric of the work of art. The work is comprised of the same elemental matter as the world. It too holds things in a circle about itself, such that vision is apprehended in the things encompassed in the work. It is this meticulous placing of things within a work, in that place where the work itself undertakes to see, which enables the work to be a visible thing among things. And by a related operation,

the artist's vision moves among those spaces as well. In short, the artist's body is caught up in the living textures of his work.

[11] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p.164.

[12] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 165.

[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed., p. 83.

[14] Paul Klee, *On Modern Art*, Intro., Herbert Read (UK: Faber and Faber, Wiltshire, 1948/1987), p. 15.

[15] Wieland Schmied, *Max Ernst: Inside the Sight* (Houston, Texas: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1973), p. 24.

[16] Schmied, *loc. cit.*

[17] W S Di Piero, *Out of Eden: Essays on Modern Art*, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1991), p. 237.

[18] Paul Crowther, "Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art," in *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 43.

The attempt to see is to approximate oneself to what one sees. This strange possession which art evokes and which transports to a pitch is vision itself, Merleau-Ponty says. Vision is excitable and ecstatic. In abstract expressionist painting, for example, we recognize what is demonstrably ecstatic painterly *jouissance*: pigment appears deported upon the canvas with almost Promethean ardor. Painting gives "visibility to what profane vision believes to be invisible," Merleau-Ponty declares; which is to say, we are given through painting some possession of "the voluminosity of the world." Through this initiation we are accorded some sign of painting's power to elicit invisibility's concealed realms. And as Paul Crowther has argued, "any 'meaning' which becomes 'visible' or 'speaks' to us, in perception, does so only in so far as it is defined against an invisible or silent background of perceptual, reflective, and historical relationships and its invisible-silent foundations."

[19] Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signes*, trans., Richard C McCleary (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1960/1964), p. 55.

[20] Andre Malraux, quoted in *Signes*, p. 55.

[21] Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, p. 56.

Merleau-Ponty alludes to the ever-present rupture between the eye and the world, and makes a plea for their restoration through an artist's ability to bear the world, or to world a world, to invoke Martin Heidegger. The artist worlds a world through his perception. If art says something, as Merleau-Ponty believes, then it requires and asserts a new orientation between things, demands a truer relation between itself and the things of the world, so that out of this relation might arise the essence of things in their artistic reinvention.

[22] Crowther, "Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art," p. 44.

[23] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-*

*Sense*, trans., Hubert L. Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 53.

[24] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 57.

[25] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 218.

[26] Jacques Taminiaux, "The Thinker and the Painter," in *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed., Martin C. Dillon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 198.

[27] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 212-213.

[28] *Stelarc*, an Australian performance artist, is based at the *Arts Digital Research Unit*, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom.

[29] Eagleton, "Body Work," p. 160.

[30] Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters on Cézanne*, ed. Clara Rilke (United Kingdom: Vintage Edition, 1907), p. 5.

[31] Hugh J. Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger: Interpreting Hegel," in *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism* (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 133.

[32] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed., Hal Foster, (United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1988), p. 58.

[33] Owens, "The Discourse of Others," pp. 58-59.

[34] Paul Klee, *On Modern Art*, Intro., Herbert Read (UK: Faber and Faber, Wiltshire, 1948/1987).

[35] D. N. Rodowick, "Impure Mimesis or the Ends of the Aesthetic," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, eds., Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 96-97.

The postmodern aesthetic arguably has its origins in the modern idea of the aesthetic, something which, Rodowick claims, took its rise from "the systematic retreat in philosophy from understanding the social and historical meanings of representational practices." He locates a certain interiorizing of subjectivity which identifies discourse with speech and pure thought "as distinguished from external perceptions derived from nature;" which is to say that here a certain privileging of discourse over the senses occurs in accounting for the subjective aspects of our experience of the world.

[36] David Farrell Krell, "Art and Truth in Raging Discord: Heidegger and Nietzsche on the Will to Power," in *Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature: Toward a Postmodern Literary Hermeneutics*, ed. William V. Spanos (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 40-41.

Exposing a Nietzschean proposition that art is the fundamental occurrence of all being, and that being is 'self-creating, the artist remains, according to Krell, one in whom the struggle against atomistic experience can only be by way of indirection. For since "the artist's creative life [is] ruled by a yes-saying

response to the chaos of Becoming . . . the achievement of art shatters the subject-object relation, [and thus fuses] worker and work." Such is an artist's self-production, Krell declares.

[37] Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 114ff.

[38] Charles Altieri, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 168ff.

[39] Cornelia Parker and Mateusz Fahrenholz, cited in *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock* (London: Art and Design Profile, No 40, 1995), pp. 9-17, and pp. 87-95.

[40] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 221.

[41] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 211.

Derek Whitehead

Sydney, Australia

[dhw@westnet.com.au](mailto:dhw@westnet.com.au)

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