When The Trees Look Back: Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Art

by

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Meaning or sense \([\text{sens}]\) is traditionally thought to be bestowed by a subject, or found ready-made within the world. Against these views Merleau-Ponty develops an account of the genesis of sense in which it arises from the mutually formative relation between an intentionally directed body and the perceptual levels of the world. In this thesis I explore the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of sense for the work of art, arguing ultimately that artistic sense arises from a reversible relation between artist and world, intention and process, historical works and artistic goals, viewer and work. This account deepens through an analysis of the ontology of the Flesh through which we find that sense, as the intentional being of the body and the world, is what constitutes subject and object in the first place. Through a folding back on itself, being senses itself and gives rise to a generative difference through which new sense can emerge in perception, expression and aesthetic experience.
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# When The Trees Look Back: Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Art

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Introduction

There is a tendency to account for the meaning [sens]\(^1\) of a work of art by attempting to locate its origin in the artist, the object, or the viewer. Aesthetic theories which locate meaning in the artist have historically highlighted the importance of genius, originality, or the biography or psychology of the artist. Aesthetic theories which locate meaning in the object have tended to focus on the formal properties of the work of art, or its iconography. Those which locate meaning in the viewer have tended to draw attention to the act of interpretation. In recent years, there has been a reaction against traditional accounts of artistic meaning as a result of the genius of the artist,\(^2\) and a shift towards the viewer as a locus of meaning.\(^3\) This has been accompanied by a shift toward more collaborative models of art creation.\(^4\)

Yet the tendency to locate the meaning of a work of art in the artist, object or viewer is founded on ontological assumptions about the relation between subject and world, self and other, as well as the origin and nature of meaning which the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty does not share. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty rejects both (i) the intellectualist account of perceptual meaning as a result of cognitive judgment according to the categories of the understanding and (ii) the Husserlian account

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\(^1\) In the following pages the word “sense” is often preferred to “meaning” for its resonance with the French *sens*, which connotes both ‘meaning’ and ‘direction’ as well as ‘way’ or ‘manner.’ (See PP, Translator’s Note, 499.)

\(^2\) See especially Rosalind Krauss’ *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” and Foucault’s account of the impersonality of the author-function in “What is An Author?”

\(^3\) “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” (Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 148).

\(^4\) See, for example, Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, Claire Bishop’s alternative account of participatory art practices in “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” and Rancière’s account of the historical drive to activate the viewer in *The Emacipated Spectator.*
of meaning as the bestowal of sense through the intentional activity of the subject [\textit{Sinnggebung}], as well as (iii) the empiricist account of meaning as the result of a fortuitous agglomeration of impressions according to laws of association. In order to develop a “new meaning of the word meaning,” Merleau-Ponty turns to aesthetic experience.

After rejecting Descartes’ analysis of painting as illusion, and commenting that “every theory of painting is a metaphysics,” Merleau-Ponty indicates that “a closer study of painting would lead to a different philosophy”. In the following pages, I will take up this provocative hint and examine Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic writings in light of his late ontology in order to flesh out this “painterly metaphysics” and develop an account of how perceptual experience and artworks have meaning.

I will argue that Merleau-Ponty’s account of reversibility entails a re-thinking of the subject-object relation often assumed to constitute the meaning of a work of art. For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is no longer actively bestowed by the constituting subject on a brute meaningless world, as in idealism, nor is it the result of fortuitous associations between what is impressed upon a passive empirical subject, as in empiricism. Instead, meaning arises from the encounter between an intentionally directed body and the horizon of the lifeworld.

One implication of this for aesthetics is that artistic meaning can no longer be regarded as the exclusive purview of artist, object or viewer. If artist and art object, if art object and viewer, if present art and past art history, are mutually formative, resisting

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5 PP, 170.
6 EM, 132.
7 Much of my analysis will centre on Merleau-Ponty’s wonderful and enigmatic last essay, “Eye and Mind,” about which Sartre famously commented that it “says it all, providing one can decipher it” (Sartre, “Merleau-Ponty Vivant.” \textit{The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty}, 621). The current work is devoted to the happy task of just such a deciphering.
idealist conceptions of artistic meaning need not entail an automatic shift from the producer to the viewer of art, but rather an abandonment of the bifurcation of the subject and the object that creates this false dichotomy in the first place.

The meaning of the work of art need not therefore be located entirely on the “subject-pole” or on the “object-pole,” on the artist side or on the viewer side. Rather, it emerges in the reversible relation between the mutually formative terms of the Flesh. The meaning of a work of art is instituted in the relation between artist and work and viewer and work, against the horizon of past art and future telos of current artistic goals. The work of art is therefore the site of a “genesis of sense”8 arising in the reversible relation of the Flesh between artist and world, artist and other, artist and work, work and other.

In the first chapter, I will provide a brief summary of how meaning emerges in the perceptual relation between an intentionally directed organism and the structures of the environment. In the second chapter, I will discuss how meaning emerges in the expressive relation between an artist and nature. In the final chapter I will discuss how meaning arises in the relation between a viewer and a work of art; this chapter will begin with a phenomenological description of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s installation Lost in the Memory Palace currently on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I will then discuss the carnal ideality of the work of art and the phenomenon of “seeing according to.”

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8 Sinngenesis. This term originates in Husserl’s Formal and Transcendental Logic and is quoted by Merleau-Ponty in (PP, xxi).
Chapter One:
The Genesis of Sense in Perception

*It is easy to strip language and action of all meaning and to make them seem absurd...But that other miracle, the fact that in an absurd world language and behavior do have meaning for those who speak and act, remains to be understood...*\(^9\)

I. Sense and Bodily Experience

How is it that my perceptual experience is meaningful? How is it that when I open my eyes, I see things and a world and not chaos? In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty develops an account of meaning in perception that departs from traditional intellectualist and empiricist approaches to perceptual epistemology. Traditional philosophy of perception “distinguishes within it sense-givens and the meaning which they receive from an act of understanding.”\(^10\) In *empiricism*, perception is the sensation of atomic sense data such as colour, texture, shape etc. By themselves sense data are meaningless points of information. It is only when they are connected together according to principles of association such as *resemblance*, *continguity*, and *causation* that we can recognize objects. This makes possible the “imposition of meaning on a chaos of sense data.”\(^11\)

Yet even to judge that two points resemble each other requires a prior connection between data to make the comparison. Furthermore, as the experiments of the Gestalt psychologists show, rather than atomic particulars, our simplest sensory experience is that of a figure on a ground.\(^12\) The empiricist sense “datum” is therefore an abstraction

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\(^9\) SNS, 39.
\(^10\) PP, 150.
\(^11\) PP, 23.
\(^12\) PP, 4. Merleau-Ponty is especially influenced on this point by the investigations of the Gestalt psychologists Wolfgang Köhler, Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein.
from our more primordial experience of a whole. While we can extract parts from our perceptual experience through analysis and reflection, we have no reason to assume that these are constitutive of perceptual experience.

In *intellectualism*, perception is explained as an activity of the mind. In Cartesian philosophy, seeing becomes *thought of* seeing as perceptions become the objects of an ‘I think’. In Kantian philosophy, the faculty of Understanding is needed to unify the manifold of Intuition according to the Categories so that it becomes possible to perform cognitive judgements and recognize ordinary objects.

The Husserlian concept of “constitution” or sense-bestowal (*Sinnggebung*) is another frequent target of Merleau-Ponty’s reprobation. Yet interestingly enough, it is Husserl’s early *static* account of constitution, and not his later *genetic* account, that is subject to criticism.\(^{13}\) In the *Ideas* Husserl argues that, in pre-reflective life what is given to us in instantaneous perception is the subject-relative profiles, or perspective-views of things. We must combine this sensory “matter” (hyletic data) in time through a synthesis in which consciousness provides an intentional “form” in order to structure it into a meaningful whole.\(^{14}\) Looking at a cube, I can only see one side. However, as I move around it, I can connect the sides together. This “synthesis” allows me to constitute the cube as a stable object, and to predicate certain meanings of it, such as “cube”. I can thereby see it as a cube, the “as-structure” of consciousness being another name for intentionality.

\(^{13}\) Sokolowski makes a similar observation; see *The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution*, 211.

\(^{14}\) In many ways this is similar to the Kantian act of cognitive judgment in which the Understanding unifies the sensuous manifold given to Intuition according to the Categories of the Understanding. Yet as Sokolowski rightly observes, while Kant’s Categories are fixed in advance of experience (as the condition of the possibility of that experience), in Husserl “whatever categories are constituted are the result of encounter; they are never found before encounter and imposed on it” (216). Husserl’s intentional forms have a strange status as an a priori that is formed a posteriori. This paradox is possibly what motivates his later genetic account.
The concept of sense-bestowal attempts to account for the role of intentionality in the presentation of intentional objects. *Intentionality* is commonly understood as the directedness of consciousness. All consciousness is consciousness of something; that is to say, consciousness is directed towards an intentional object. Furthermore, the way that phenomena are revealed is dependent on the attitude that consciousness adopts toward them. For example, in the *natural attitude*, consciousness brings with it certain assumptions derived from the natural sciences concerning the nature of what is perceived. In the phenomenological *reflective attitude*, these assumptions are suspended so that the phenomena might then reveal themselves to consciousness. In this way the intentionality of consciousness provides a certain “orientation to the indeterminate that makes a certain style of meaning, of significance, possible at all.”\(^{15}\) That is, consciousness adopts an intentional *attitude* that lays out a field in which entities can first appear as meaningful.

Yet the account of meaning as sense-bestowal (*Sinngebung*) results in a certain idealism, for on this account all significance streams from the subject. Both the stable object and its meaning (the *noema*) are bestowed through the intentional act (*noesis*). Things beyond the intentional activity of the subject are meaningless. As Merleau-Ponty objects,

> It is characteristic of idealism to grant that all significance is centrifugal, being an act of significance or *Sinngebung*.\(^{16}\)

Furthermore, on this account meanings are static, and do not change if they are re-encountered. Yet often things can be re-identified as the same while their meaning changes, as the meaning of Proust’s little phrase changes for Swann when he hears it for a second, and a third time.

\(^{15}\) Sokolowski. *The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution*, 211.

\(^{16}\) PP, 498.
In his *Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness* Husserl begins to abandon the schema of intentionality as a static form that unifies the changing matter of sensation. Now intentionality comes to be figured as a temporal stream in which present apprehensions have a dual horizon of past moments in *retention* and future moments in *protention*. As Merleau-Ponty will later insist, there is no pure impression, because each part “arouses the expectation of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a meaning.”¹⁷ Perception is always ahead of itself, in the sense that although I am only given a part of the object, I anticipate the whole, and make sense of it in terms of that whole. Yet for Husserl in the time-consciousness lectures, it is still consciousness that bestows upon objects their temporal structure.¹⁸ This carries the implication that primitive sensations are non-temporal, and that even objective time (the time of changing entities that are transcendent to the subject) must be subjectively constituted. It is still consciousness (albeit temporalized consciousness) that informs sensuous matter.

In later writings, such as *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl comes to see meaning as developing through a process of sedimentation. In this new *genetic* account, meanings deposited through predication become sedimented within the object and become available to a subsequent encounter. For example, if I judge that S is P, when I encounter S again the meaning P will be a part of my experience of S. Q can then be predicated of SP. The sedimented meanings from previous predication have the advantage of facilitating my recognition of the object in subsequent encounters. Yet one consequence is that where previously the *noema* (the meaning and objectivity of

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¹⁷ PP, 4. Note that the directionality of the present is its sens.
a thing) was required to be static to guarantee the identity of the object, now meanings
develop and change.\(^\text{19}\)

Furthermore, in order to make a second judgment, I must encounter S again. While meaning is still the result of an activity of the subject, the necessity of encountering the object again gives rise to a more productive role for sensation. Sokolowski argues that in the *Formal and Transcendental Logic* Husserl begins to move away from the matter-form schema (hylomorphism) according to which sensations are passive matter formed by intentional acts.\(^\text{20}\) Now sensations come to be a source of primitive meanings\(^\text{21}\) that can be explicitly developed through predication. As Sokolowski explains,

> the pure sensation already possess inchoate senses, it has anticipations of sense which will gradually develop into full, fixed meanings in predication.\(^\text{22}\)

Sensations are no longer passive recipients of meaning from an activity of consciousness, but can themselves influence meaning.

In the *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, the origin of meaning in pre-predicative experience comes to be more fully examined. Husserl now argues that our individual perceptions depend for their structure and meaning on a ground of which we are not fully conscious. This ground is that of the life-world [Le-

\(^{19}\) “Were there not some preservation of meaning content from an earlier intending of an object through later ones (allowing for temporal dispersion and interruption), every object would have to be encountered as if for the first and only time. However, it is also necessary that some provision be made to account for the fact of change in meaning content, no matter how slight, from one intention to another, even when the events in question are successive intendings of the same object.” (Dillon, *Gestalt and Intentionality*, 441.)

\(^{20}\) Sokolowski. *The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution*, 178. Sokolowski argues that Husserl rejects the matter-form schema as a kind of psychologism. “Husserl thus includes his own earlier schematism of sense data and apprehension under the condemnation of psychologism.”

\(^{21}\) What Merleau-Ponty will later call “wild meaning”; see, for example, VI, 155.

\(^{22}\) Sokolowski. *The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution*, 211.
benswelt], that meaningful whole which is present before our birth, into whose structures we must be inducted as we grow, and towards which all of our activity is directed. The world forms not only the spatial horizon of the perceptual field, but also the temporal horizon of our past and future, of our intersubjective life with other humans, and of our practical ends and interests. The life-world functions as a “meaning-fundament” for such cultural formations as geometry and art. The primitive meanings encountered in the life-world can become the object of intersubjective reference. Language in particular can stabilize these primitive meanings and render them available to other people at other times. Other meanings and idealizations can be founded on the basis of the primitive meanings of the life-world, such as those of geometry, the exact sciences, art, or philosophy itself. However, these depend for their significance on the horizon of the life-world.

(a) A Question of Method

Having laid out the horizon of the life-world, the task of phenomenology in the Crisis becomes a kind of archeology, sifting through the sediment of meanings to uncover the genesis of sense in pre-predicative experience. In order to understand the meaning of a historical tradition, the phenomenologist must return to the “meaning-fundament,” the

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23 “Constantly co-functioning as meaning-fundament, is the world which gives itself, and just as it gives itself, in actual experience, the ‘world of sensibility.’ This world is changing in its particular styles but [is] invariant in its invariant structure of generality.” Husserl, Crisis, 347.

24 The task of genetic phenomenology is described by Husserl in the following way in the Formal and Transcendental Logic: “Static analysis is guided by the unity of the supposed object. It starts from the unclear manners of givenness and, following the reference made by them as intentional modifications, it strives toward what is clear. Genetical intentional analysis, on the other hand, is directed to the whole concrete nexus in which each particular consciousness stands, along with its intentional object as intentional. Immediately the problem becomes extended to include the other intentional references, those belonging to the situation in which, for example, the subject exercising the judicative activity is standing, and to include, therefore, the immanent unity of the temporality of the life that has its ‘history’ therein, in such a fashion that every single process of consciousness, as occurring temporally, has its own ‘history’ - that is: its temporal genesis.” (Formal and Transcendental Logic, 316.)
origin of the historical accomplishment in question, and the source of its meaning. This would be a return to the self-evidence presupposed by history—namely, to the present.

But how can we return to the present of a past we never lived? A certain circularity results, since the cultural formations developed on the horizon of the life-world “flow back” into it and form the basis for subsequent pre-predicative encounters. However, the claim is not that we can strip away the layers of culture to return to the life-world naked and unmediated. Since the cultural-historical life-world is the horizon of significance, any attempt simply to substract the idealization from our present recollection of the past would produce an unintelligible abstraction.

The distinguishing feature of the life-world is not the presence or absence of culture, but the attitude of consciousness towards it. As David Carr observes, the perceptual and the cultural versions of the life-world are both pre-theoretical. That is, they are distinguished from the a priori of the life-world by the attitude that consciousness has in being directed toward it. In the natural attitude, the world gives itself as the domain of things, ends, time, others. While these may appear in different modalities of certainty, the world itself has unquestioned validity. In this way, the life-world is the correlate of the natural attitude. In order to inquire into the conditions of its constitutive possibility, a different attitude must be adopted, the reflective attitude, in which one suspends belief in the being of the world as existing in itself, and pays attention to how the life-world gives itself. By means of this epochē of the life-world, the world itself becomes a phenomenon,

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25 “Judgments arise from our encounter with reality, but they also determine and illuminate our subsequent encounter out of which further judgments arise.” (Solowkowski The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution, 171.)
26 Carr, Husserl’s Problematic Concept of the Life-world, 339.
whereas normally, in the natural attitude, it remains the horizon of unquestioned validity against which phenomena appear.\textsuperscript{28}

The next step is the \textit{epoché of objective science}, by means of which the phenomenologist suspends the validity of scientific theories about the being and nature of the things in the world and of the world itself, and her practical interests regarding them.\textsuperscript{29} Then \textit{imaginative variation} may be used in order to uncover the structures of the life-world. By means of this imaginative variation, the factually valid historical world becomes merely one conceptual possibility. The phenomenologist then imagines different features of concrete historical worlds, to see if invariant essential structures of the life-world begin to emerge.\textsuperscript{30} Imaginative variation, like reflection, has the result of suspending the validity of the life-world.

Merleau-Ponty has a somewhat different approach to the phenomenological attitude of reflection. On the one hand, reflection is necessary, since our existence is “too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement.”\textsuperscript{31} Ideas can help us to become \textit{aware} of our facticity, as well as the “intentional threads” that bind us to the world.\textsuperscript{32} On the other hand, because our thought takes place \textit{within} the temporal flux of our pre-reflective experience and not beyond it, there is no reflection which can rid itself of its own roots in the world and leave nothing outside itself. A complete reduction is therefore impossible.\textsuperscript{33} This means that as phenomenologists, we are perpetual beginners, constantly oscillating between pre-reflective experience

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Husserl, \textit{Crisis}, 174.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Husserl, \textit{Crisis}, 156.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Husserl, \textit{Origin}, 375.
\item \textsuperscript{31} PP, xvi
\item \textsuperscript{32} PP, xv.
\item \textsuperscript{33} PP, xv. “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”
\end{itemize}
and reflection, inspired to reflect by experience and returning to experience from reflection to check the products of reflection against experience.

Furthermore, reflection can sometimes distort its findings. While reflection can reveal certain structures of the life-world that escaped notice before, it can also obscure others through prejudices which have not yet been revealed. There is no guarantee that the products of reflection are constitutive of the world. Nor is a transcendental consciousness fully transparent to itself. Because of this, Barbaras has observed that Merleau-Ponty inverts the meaning of the epoché.\(^{34}\) Rather than overturning the natural attitude in favour of a transcendental consciousness, Merleau-Ponty uses reflection to clarify the pre-predicative natural attitude, in order to call into question consciousness and reflection itself. This is the origin of Merleau-Ponty’s call for a kind of reflection that also calls itself into question. This hyper-reflection would “also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account”\(^{35}\).

(b) Habit: The Motor Grasping of a Motor Significance

As we have seen, the world is a horizon of sense that forms the ground for pre-predicative meaning. Yet how can there be meaning that is not the product of consciousness? Our first answer comes through Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of habit. For an empiricist, habit is a mechanistic reflex, an involuntary action or a conditioned response. Yet Merleau-Ponty observes that a rat learning a maze by trial and error still makes certain

\(^{34}\) Barbaras, “Merleau-Ponty and Nature,” 28: “One does not go from a neutralization of nature to the affirmation of transcendental consciousness, but rather from the clarification of nature to a reform, indeed a calling into question of, consciousness.”

\(^{35}\) VI, 38.
trials of the route which have a systematic character, as if proceeding according to a hypothesis.\textsuperscript{36} The rat behaves intentionally— that is, in a directed manner.

The body’s intentional activity structures the perceptual field. I must \textit{look} in order to \textit{see}, and what I look at will show up as figure on the ground of the world. Intentionality has an act character. It is a kind of praxis, a movement. Consciousness is not an ‘I think’ for Merleau-Ponty, but an ‘I can’.\textsuperscript{37} Yet Merleau-Ponty argues that intentionality is an activity not only of consciousness, but of the body as well. The directedness of the body in motion is an activity that structures our perception of the world. Merleau-Ponty calls this \textit{motor intentionality}.\textsuperscript{38} A hand is primarily a power of grasping, as a leg is a capacity to walk. It is this bodily intentionality that forms the basis for the intentionality of “consciousness.” Through our intentional behaviour, the body serves as our “general medium of having a world”.\textsuperscript{39} Yet the directness of the rat’s behaviour is possible only if the situation has a “biological meaning” [\textit{sens}] for the rat;\textsuperscript{40} that is, if it occurs within a field or organic framework which gives the rat a goal and direction, an objective to be attained at the maze, such as food or freedom.\textsuperscript{41} This means that the intentional activity of the body is not the source of all meaning, for the body is always responding to a meaningful \textit{world}.

Intellectualism conceives of habit as a form of knowledge: the subsumption of particulars under a law. Yet it is unnecessary to know where all my limbs are in objective space (on a map or GPS) to move them toward the object of my action, or where my fingers are, or the keys are, to play the keyboard. When I learn to drive a car, slipping into a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} SB 100.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} PP, 159.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} PP, 127.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} PP, 169.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} PP, 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Meaning for an organism is defined by certain preferred states toward which it exhibits intentional behaviour. See SB, 123.
\end{itemize}
parking space without dinging the cars around me, or to negotiate a safe distance between my over-sized hat and a doorway, I incorporate the car or the hat into my sense of my own body. 42 I know, without measuring, how much space is required to get through. Yet this kind of knowledge is not intellectual, but a “knowledge in the hands.”43 As Merleau-Ponty argues,

bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents.44

That is, the world provides certain structures to which we must accommodate ourselves, such as the roughness or smoothness of a surface for walking. “Understanding” how to perform a task is a matter of the skillful adjustment of our body to these structures so that we can accomplish our aim.

In this way the world is the horizon of significance towards which bodily activity is directed. The world is the “cradle of meanings, direction of all directions [sens de tous les sens].”45 For Merleau-Ponty, we are not “condemned to be free,” but condemned to meaning.46 That is, we are born into a world whose meaningful structures we did not create, and to which we are compelled to respond. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

The world is there before any possible analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality.47

42 PP, 165.
43 PP, 166.
44 PP, 170.
45 PP, 500
46 “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning.” (PP, xxii.)
47 PP, x.
The world is not the result of a synthesis of components but is an originary whole. The world is not constituted by an operation of consciousness, but operates as a horizon against which the intentional object (theme) comes to reveal itself in pre-reflective experience. Since the horizon is by definition not the intentional object of my attention, it often escapes notice. Yet it provides the context in which the sense of the intentional object appears.

This phenomenon is strikingly similar to the Gestalt principle of contextual relevancy as demonstrated by Edgar Rubin. The perceptual value of a figure is affected by the ground on which it appears. As the ground changes, so too does the figure. Yet, like a horizon, the perceptual ground often escapes explicit attention. While the figure tends to be read as a thing, the ground extends behind it as a shapeless field. This occurs even when, prior to any figure-ground reversal, it had been read as a thing a moment earlier, as in the famous ambiguous drawing of the Vase-Face.

As we have seen, habitual movement involves the grasping of a significance; but this is not the intellectual grasping of a concept, but the “motor grasping of a motor significance”. Admittedly, this is a “new meaning of the word ‘meaning’.” Normally meaning is understood as either the linguistic significance of words established by arbitrary convention, or the cognitive act according to which something is subsumed under a concept and thereby “understood.” Yet these are secondary kinds of meaning dependent on the more primordial meaning of the perceived world as it reveals itself to the moving body. The motor significance of habitual actions is the meaning grasped by the body in

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48 Rubin, “Figure and Ground.” Readings in Perception, 194-203.
49 PP, 165.
50 PP, 170.
the world, whether or not this significance is made the object of thematic cognitive reflection. As such, this significance forms “the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape.”\(^{51}\)

(c) Levels: Perceptual Norms of the World

As we have seen, the world forms a field of sense to which the body responds. Yet how exactly does the world structure our perceptual experience? What is the role of the worldly horizon in the genesis of sense? Merleau-Ponty gives several examples of worldly perceptual structures to which the body responds. For example, trying to orient myself in an ambiguous space, I seek out cues as to which way is up or down. Yet the walls themselves do not provide these cues. If I am made to see the room I am in through a mirror which reflects it at a 45-degree angle, the walls at first appear tilted. After several minutes my perception will adjust and objects dropped from the ceiling appear to fall on a 45-degree angle.\(^{52}\) This happens as I “gear into” the space as a possible habitat and a field of action. Even if my body is on a tilt in relation to the corners of the room and the plumb line represented by the falling objects, a certain norm has established itself that allows me to orient myself. Merleau-Ponty calls this the \textit{spatial level}. It is not established by me through an orientation according to cardinal directions in absolute space, the geometrical edges of the room, or even the orientation of my own body (as vertical or horizontal). Rather, it is a structure of the world to which I must adjust if I am skillfully to

\(^{51}\) PP, xvii.
\(^{52}\) PP, 289.
cope with my environment. In this way “the visual field can impose an orientation which is not that of the body.”

A similar structure is provided by lighting. Light is ordinarily not seen as an object, but operates as a power of making visible. Approaching my house after a long day outside in the snow, the tungsten light inside is a warm yellow glow. As I enter the space, the light inside begins to appear white and the daylight outside appears bluish. A perceptual norm has been established by the dominant light source; it is neutral white and all the other colours of the spectrum distribute themselves in accordance with it. Merleau-Ponty calls this the lighting level. It is a structure of the world, an aesthetic coherence that “directs my gaze” according to its sense. I perceive in conformity with the light, I do not impose a sense upon it.

It might be objected that even if the world directs my perceptual experience according to its own sense, I can still choose to see it differently. The as-structure of intentionality means that I may see it differently as I vary my attention. A drawing of an ambiguous figure could be seen as a cube or as a mosaic figure. Yet I am more likely to see it as a cube if I concentrate my gaze first on its front face and then follow the oblique lines to the second face, and more likely to see it as a mosaic if I am directed by the diagonal lines which split the faces into triangles to concentrate my gaze first on its centre,

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53 PP, 290.
54 Lighting and reflection “lead our gaze instead of arresting it.” (PP 361)
55 PP, 360.
56 “The lighting directs my gaze and causes me to see the object, so that in a sense it knows and sees the object... our own vision merely takes up on its own account and carries through the encompassing of the scene by those paths traced out for it by the lighting, just as, when we hear a sentence, we are surprised to discover the track of an alien thought. We perceive in conformity with the light, as we think in conformity with other people in verbal communication.” (PP 361)
and then simultaneously take in the whole figure.\textsuperscript{57} As Merleau-Ponty says, “this grasp and this delineation are not arbitrary. They are indicated or recommended by phenomena.”\textsuperscript{58} The lines which compose the figure direct my gaze either from the “front” face toward the “back” face, or scatter it around the whole figure. Rather than confine me to an idealism, the ability to see the cube differently places me firmly within the world, since the cube sustains multiple interpretations. Without the freedom to see the drawing as a cube or a mosaic, I would be limited to my immanent image of the thing, with its immanent significance. I would not be in a world where my intentions reach toward the thing that transcends me and toward its sense, which is suggested yet not exhausted by it.\textsuperscript{59}

In this way, the world is a field of meaning which is not bestowed by the subject, but directs and is directed, structures and is structured by bodily interaction. As Merleau-Ponty says,

\begin{quote}
There is an autochthonous significance of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it, and which provides the ground of every deliberate Sinngebung.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

Like a ripple that constantly spreads outward and then inward when it hits a surface, Sinngebung is not only centrifugal, but centripetal as well.\textsuperscript{61} There is no sense without a field of sense—i.e. the world—and no freedom without a field of possibilities. And yet my in-

\textsuperscript{57} PP, 307. As Merleau-Ponty later remarks, “as if, on the hither side of our judgement and our freedom, someone were assigning such and such a significance to such and such a given grouping.” (511).
\textsuperscript{58} PP, 307.
\textsuperscript{59} Without the freedom to break up a shape by looking at it awry, “we should never be aware of adjusting ourselves to things and reaching them where they are, beyond us, but would be conscious only of restricting our thoughts to the immanent objects of our intentions, and we should not be in the world, ourselves implicated in the spectacle and, so to speak, intermingled with things.” (PP, 512)
\textsuperscript{60} PP, 512.
\textsuperscript{61} PP, 510.
tentional attitudes shape the world as it appears to me, and my actions create new possibilities. My project to climb a mountain establishes the mountain as obstacle or as means. Sense is neither bestowed on the world solely by me, as in idealism, nor imposed on me solely by the world, as in realism. Rather, sense emerges in the mutually formative relation between the intentional activity of my body and the field of sense provided by the world.

(d) Towards Reversibility: Circular Causality and Fundierung

As we have seen, the body actively structures its world through motor intentionality, yet it is also sensitive to perceptual norms or levels to which it must respond in order to “gear into” the world. There is therefore a kind of reciprocity between the body and the world. One of the first articulations of this peculiar process occurs in the Structure of Behavior, where Merleau-Ponty describes the kind of circular causality that obtains between the organism and its environment. As we have seen, the behaviour of the organism is not a simple reflex in reaction to the stimulus of the environment, as behaviourism insists. Rather, the organism is directed toward its environment according to its own internal norms, “as if there were an ‘a priori of the organism,’ privileged conducts and laws of internal equilibrium which predisposed the organism to certain relations with its milieu.” Yet the

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62 PP, 510.
63 SB, 15: “The relations between the organism and its milieu are not relations of linear causality but of circular causality.”
64 See An Unpublished Text, 284: “Behaviors reveal a sort of prospective activity in the organism, as if it were oriented toward the sense of certain elementary situations, as if it entertained familiar relations with them, as if there were an ‘a priori of the organism,’ privileged conduct and laws of internal equilibrium which predisposed the organism to certain relations with its milieu. At this level there is no question yet of a genuine becoming conscious or of an intentional activity.” See also SB, 100: “These trials must occur in a certain organic framework which gives them meaning and efficacy; they presuppose a ‘sensory-motor a priori,’ practical ‘categories’ which
organism also responds to the field of sense provided by the environment as well. What is encountered a posteriori can contribute to the a priori of the organism, structuring it so as subsequently to respond better to its sense. As David Morris explains,

what is passively given a posteriori is in fact actively operative in creating the a priori of perception; in turn, this a priori actively shapes the activity through which we are passive to and thence perceive things.65

What we have previously perceived actively structures how we perceive in the future. The perceiver is passive to the initial founding term, which subsequently shapes her activity. In this way the organism “contributes actively to the formation of the stimulus to which it reacts.” As Michael B. Smith observes,

This circular causality, the mutual interference of subject and object, mind and matter, is not an exceptional case but the norm, and the necessary condition of lived experience.67

In ecology, this kind of circular causality is a familiar concept, as an ecosystem depends on the organisms that compose it, which in turn depend on the whole ecosystem to survive. Within the organism, the organs depend on the whole organism, which in turn depends on the organs.68 Neither whole nor part is exclusively founding—rather both are

differ from one species to another.” This is why the rat’s trials of the maze have a “systematic character” (100).

66 Smith, Michael B. “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics,” Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, p.194.
67 Smith, Michael B. “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics,” Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, p.194.
68 The circular causality between organism and environment is very similar to the mutual foundation (Fundierung) between parts and whole described by Husserl in Logical Investigations. As Husserl explains, “The contents of which we speak have plenty to do with each other, they are in fact ‘founded’ on one another, and for this reason they require no chains and bonds to chain or knit them together, or to bring them to one another. In their case all these expressions have in fact no sense at all. Where it makes nonsense to speak of isolation, the problem of overcoming this isolation is likewise nonsensical.” (Husserl, Logical Investigations, vol. 2, 36.)
founding and founded at once. Together, parts and whole compose the total Gestalt of organism/environment, what Barbaras calls the “originary totality”\textsuperscript{69} from which organism and environment are derived.\textsuperscript{70}

This dynamic process of mutual foundation also allows for the genesis of biological sense such as the organism’s body plan and behaviour. For example, the body of the organism is a result of this “self-articulating, self-transforming structure.”\textsuperscript{71} As Morris has argued, form is produced not through a genetic code conceived on analogy with a fixed state computer, but rather, through a regulatory genome in complex interaction with the environment. As the organism “takes its own output as its input,”\textsuperscript{72} a kind of feedback loop emerges between the organism and its environment that generates sense at a biological level- for example, whether an organ is to be a leg or an antenna.\textsuperscript{73} Biological development is therefore “the environmentally embedded self-transformation of one overall structure.”\textsuperscript{74}

The behaviour of the organism also emerges through a complex interplay of forces. In some ways this is like the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces which form the sphere of a soap bubble. Between the air inside which demands the maximum volume, and the air outside which demands the minimum volume, an equilibrium is achieved producing the resultant form.\textsuperscript{75} The organism differs from the soap bubble, however, in that while the formation of the soap bubble is governed by physical laws giv-

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\textsuperscript{69} Although, as a process, and not an entity, it is what Merleau-Ponty calls an “open totality”; see PP, 255.
\textsuperscript{70} Barbaras, “Movement of the Living.” 531.
\textsuperscript{71} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science: From Structure, Sense and Expression, to Life as Phenomenal Field,” 98.
\textsuperscript{72} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 98.
\textsuperscript{73} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 97.
\textsuperscript{74} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 99.
\textsuperscript{75} SB, 146.
en in advance, the organism has the capacity to generate its own laws of growth, to literally \textit{form itself} in response to its environment. As Morris explains, “sense is determined according to standards themselves generated by the organism in the course of development (and evolution), rather than standards wholly fixed in advance of development”.\textsuperscript{76}

The organism can take its a posteriori as its a priori.

The engendering of sense is always passive to yet transformative of material processes and articulatory legacies. That is, what we have here is a system that we could never think of as autonomously constituting its sense, since sense production is always a labour that operates through inherited legacies that at the same time enable new senses to develop.\textsuperscript{77}

As the organism changes itself in response to the sense of the environment, it transforms the sense of its own being.

Merleau-Ponty often draws parallels between originary creative expression and birth.\textsuperscript{78} While it is beyond the scope of this project to fully explore Merleau-Ponty’s account of biological development, it is important to note that it shares with his account of artistic creation the same ontology of \textit{expression}.\textsuperscript{79} As Morris explains,

growth is a process that exhibits the peculiar logic of expression so central to Merleau-Ponty. In this logic, the result of expression is not yet determinately contained as such in the beginning of the expressive process, since the result does not resemble this beginning. Yet, on the other hand, the result is not independent of what was there in the beginning. Sense is engendered, but not by unpacking a pre-formed sense.\textsuperscript{80}

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\textsuperscript{76} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 97.
\textsuperscript{77} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 100.
\textsuperscript{78} See for example, EM, 129: “The painter’s vision is an ongoing birth.”
\textsuperscript{79} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 97.
\textsuperscript{80} Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science,” 101.
As a result of a complex interaction between organism and environment, growth and behaviour generate sense and do not merely translate it. This paradoxical logic is perhaps most succinctly expressed by Uexküll when he describes the organism as “a melody which sings itself”\(^{81}\)—not, that is, as a performance of a ready-made score, but as an improvisation within its milieu. We will return to the ontology of expression as it appears in artistic creation in the section below entitled “The Paradox of Expression.”

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the mutually formative relation between body and world is further developed through the use of Husserl’s concept of *Fundierung*, or reciprocal foundation.\(^{82}\) Here the circular dynamic is used to elucidate the circularity between pre-reflective perceptual experience and reflection. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

> The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*: the founding term, or originator—time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from reabsorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.\(^{83}\)

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\(^{81}\) The biologist Jacob von Uexküll is cited by Merleau-Ponty at SB, 159.

\(^{82}\) As Dillon explains (*Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 52): “This reflexivity, which will require further consideration later, is conceived under the headings of *Fundierung* (Husserl’s term for the reciprocal founding-founded relationship) in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and “reversibility” in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Relevant here is the point that the notions of *Fundierung* or reversibility allow Merleau-Ponty to conceive the relationship of percept to concept as one of asymmetrical reciprocity or intertwining in such a way that, although they are inseparable correlates, the perceptual world as the founding term retains a genetic priority. There is, as he says, a nascent logos in the perceptual world that can be brought to language and which subsequently sediments itself within the field from which it originally emerged.”

\(^{83}\) PP, 458.
Although it involves reciprocity, *Fundierung* is not a symmetrical relation. Pre-reflective experience is the founding term, since our reflection is based on it. What distinguishes this process from a mere foundationalism and from an empirical founding of abstract upon concrete is that the abstract second term also has the capacity to inform and change the concrete first term. The pre-reflective can only be made explicit through the reflection which it founds. Yet the structures revealed through reflection change the initial perception, so that subsequently, it cannot be returned to unmediated.

In Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, the sense-generative, mutually formative relation between body and world achieves its final articulation in the concept of *reversibility*. Through the concept of reversibility, the mutually formative relation between organism and environment, body and world we have explored in this section is played out in a new key: the relation between the sentient and the sensible. In order to develop this concept, Merleau-Ponty turns to aesthetic experience. In the wonderful and enigmatic essay "Eye & Mind," written contemporaneously with *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explores the genesis of sense in the perception, artistic expression and the aesthetic experience of the viewer. Since Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological description of painting is essential for an understanding of reversibility and the genesis of sense, we will return to reversibility through the lens of "Eye and

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84 Dillon writes (*Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 137): “Although *Fundierung* involves reciprocity, it is not a symmetrical relation: the founding term a) [actuality, context, lived space] grounds the founded b) [possibility, constructed horizons, abstract space].”

85 The importance of reversibility (or the chiasm) to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology cannot be underestimated. Merleau-Ponty even describes it as “the ultimate truth” (VI, 155.) M.C. Dillon argues that Merleau-Ponty transitions from the *Fundierung* model to the model of reversibility while writing the *Prose of the World* (a chapter of which was later published as “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”). Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 206.
Mind." In the following pages, the phenomena of artistic perception, artistic expression and aesthetic experience will guide us through an elucidation of Merleau-Ponty’s “figured philosophy” of vision.

II. Interrogation and the Painterly Epoch

According to Merleau-Ponty, artists have a fundamentally phenomenological attitude towards the world. That is, the attitude to nature of both the phenomenologist and the painter is one of interrogation. When I ask a question, I am intentionally directed towards the answer I seek, and my questioning thereby shapes to some extent the kind of answer I will receive. And yet the answer is nonetheless beyond me; I did not create it. Interrogation is an intentional attitude that is non-constitutive, but open-ended—that is, active and passive at once. The question directed by the painter toward nature is, Merleau-Ponty tells us,

not a question asked of someone who doesn’t know by someone who does—the schoolmaster’s question. The question comes from one who does not know, and it is addressed to a vision, a seeing, which knows everything and which we do not make, for it makes itself in us.

Asking a question of nature requires a certain degree of openness. I try not to prejudge what I will find. While the world as horizon of significance ensures that the answer will be somewhat intelligible to me, I must hold my assumptions in abeyance as much as pos-

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86 In true phenomenological fashion, Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of reversibility in close dialogue with the arts. Theory here is derived from practice, rather than being imposed indifferently onto it. This re-orientation of the relation between theory and practice is perhaps one of the most important insights of phenomenology as the logos of the phenomena. It is expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s contention that philosophy achieves its fullest form in active engagement and intertwining with its other- pre-reflective experience, the arts, other disciplines, that is, non-philosophy. (See Merleau-Ponty, “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel” in Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty, pp. 9-83)

87 EM, 129.

88 EM, 128.
sible. This does not mean that I can eliminate them entirely, but I can change my attitude. That is, I can perform the *epochê*.

The painter approaches nature through a “painterly epochê” of existing formulas. This entails a shift from her everyday ways of looking at the mountain, assumptions about what the mountain is in itself, theories about its process of geological formation, its chemical composition, as well as artistic assumptions about what makes for a “correct” painting. The artist, like the phenomenologist, stands in “wonder in the face of the world.”

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Fig. 1 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, oil on canvas, 1902-4.

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89 PP, xv.
Yet for the painter’s vision to be truly phenomenological and not a mere ‘phenomenalism’, there must be an ontological component to this relation, a *logos* of the phenomena, an *essence* befitting phenomenology as the “study of essences.” If nature is “our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue,”⁹⁰ how does it respond to our interrogation? If Cézanne interrogates the mountain, *what kind of response does the mountain give back?*

Here we are led to what in phenomenology is known as the *noema*: the meaning and objectivity of the thing. In Husserl’s account this is where we should perform the *eidetic reduction*. Through an *imaginative variation*, we can discover what is essential to the thing and what is accidental, a mere fact. The invariant essence, the *eidos*, would then be revealed through the intuition of essences [*Wesensschau*].

Yet Merleau-Ponty objects that in order to fully elucidate the essence, all latency in the thing would have to be removed.⁹¹ In order to have the thing fully in view, the subject would have to be able to put it entirely under her gaze in order first to synthesize all its aspects. Yet since we are always situated within a world, things are never revealed except partially. From my point of view, things *hide* one another and only turn one face towards me, and it is always possible that they can surprise me with additional aspects. Furthermore, in order to distinguish what is essential to the thing from what is inessential, I would need to be entirely aware of my own prejudices, lest I confuse them with the essence of the thing. I would need to be a pure spectator, fully transparent to myself in order to render the thing entirely transparent to my gaze. Yet as an embodied being, I am not fully transparent to myself. Just as I cannot see my own face, or my back except in a

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⁹⁰ PP, 373.

⁹¹ As Merleau-Ponty writes: “A pure essence which would not be at all contaminated and confused with the facts could result only from an attempt at total variation. It would require a spectator himself without secrets, without latency, if we are to be certain that nothing be surreptitiously introduced into it.” (VI, 111).
mirror, my own habits of thought escape me. The horizonality of the body and the thing therefore puts serious limits on the intuition of essences.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty objects that the intuition of essences risks treating the world as a *consequence of* the products of reflection. Yet, as we have seen, the world precedes our reflective activity. Yet the tendency to consider essences as a condition of the possibility of the world reverses the order of dependency. Because of this, Merleau-Ponty argues that essences cannot be the “whole possible” or the condition of possibility of the world itself, but only its *style*.92

In addition, since what remains after imaginative variation is a static intelligible nucleus, reflection strips away both the factual and temporal aspects of the thing as inessential. However, certain beings, such as time itself, or things which come into being, cannot be captured in the invariant, but require a genetic account.93 Furthermore, imaginative variation idealizes the thing by smoothing away its individuality into a generality and thereby distorts it.94 Yet facts are not “impurities” that can be stripped away and leave the thing intact, but are crucial to its being.

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92 As Merleau-Ponty writes (VI, 109): “We do not have the right to say that the essences we find give the primitive meaning of Being, that they are the possible in itself, the whole possible, and to repute as impossible all that does not obey their laws, nor to treat Being and the world as their consequence: they are only its manner or its style, they are the *Sosein* and not the *Sein*."

93 VI, 46: “For there is no guarantee that the whole of experience can be expressed in essential invariants, that certain beings— for example, the being of time— do not in principle elude this fixation and do not require from the start, if they are to be able to be thought by us, the consideration of the fact, the dimension of facticity....”

94 See VI, 112: “It is on account of having begun with antithesis of the fact and the essence, of what is individuated in a point of space and time and what is from forever and nowhere, that one is finally led to treat the essence as a limit idea, that is, to make it inaccessible. For this is what obliged us to seek the being of the essence in the form of a second positivity beyond the order of the ‘facts,’ to dream of a variation of the thing that would eliminate from it all that is not authentically itself and would make it appear all naked whereas it is always clothed- to dream of an impossible layer of experience on experience that would strip it of its facticity as if it were an impurity.”
III. Carnal Essence

(a) Carnal Essences and the Ontology of Style

In the perception of the artist, Merleau-Ponty finds an approach to essences that does not oppose them to the facticity of the thing. What the artist seeks in interrogating nature is the *carnal essence*, the mode of being or *style* of the thing and the world. This crucial concept is perhaps best illustrated by a famous anecdote told by Malraux, and quoted frequently by Merleau-Ponty. Renoir, painting by the beach near the hotel at Cassis, is approached by the innkeeper, who wants to see him work. Says the innkeeper:

> There were some naked women bathing in some other place. Goodness knows what he was looking at, and he changed only a little corner.\(^95\)

The innkeeper believes that the task of painting is “correct” representation. That is, a passive recording of the “facts” of experience as if the eye were a sensitive plate. But where he expects a point-by-point correspondence between the seascape in front of him and the painting, he finds something that does not resemble the scene. What on earth is Renoir doing? If he is *copying* the scene, why doesn’t it look like it? If he is *inventing* something, why is he on the beach?

Merleau-Ponty’s answer to the innkeeper’s query rejects the opposition of imitation and invention that subtends it. According to Merleau-Ponty, Renoir is not imitating, since he is performing an act of interpretation as he paints, nor is he purely inventing *ex nihilo*, since his action is inspired by the movement of the water. Like Cézanne, he is interrogating the water. In so doing, Renoir is asking the sea to express its *way of being water*.

\(^{95}\) ILVS, 92.
As Merleau-Ponty explains,

each fragment of the world—and in particular the sea, sometimes riddled with eddies and ripples and plumed with spray, sometimes massive and immobile in itself—contains all sorts of shapes of being and, by the way it has of joining the encounter with one’s glance, evokes a series of possible variants and teaches, over and beyond itself, a general way of expressing being. Renoir can paint women bathing and a freshwater brook while he is by the sea at Cassis because he only asks the sea—which alone can teach what he asks—for its way of interpreting the liquid element, of exhibiting it, and of making it interact with itself. In short, because he only asks for the prototypical manifestations of water.96

These “shapes of being” are what Merleau-Ponty calls style: the mode of being, of the water, of the mountain, or of the artist himself. “Style reveals the thing in its suchness or carnal particularity.”97 It is the woodiness of the wood, the gentle curve of a brook, the jaunty angles of pear stems, the lugubriousness of my wet towel hanging over the door knob. It is not a static appearance, but a way of appearing.98 The essence discovered by Renoir is that of flowing movement (Fig. 2).

96 ILVS, 93. Italics mine.
98 “Why is painting so different from appearances? Precisely because it is Nature, not appearances, not the ‘skin of things’; because it is nature naturing: its ‘hand nothing but the instrument of a distant will’; Because it gives what nature wants to say and does not say: the ‘generating principle’ that brings things and the world into being.” (Merleau-Ponty, Notes de Cours 1959-1961, 56. Translation mine).
The concept of *carnal essence* or *style* has great importance for Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. While Merleau-Ponty has some concern that the intuition of essences strips away factical aspects of the thing which are crucial to its being, nonetheless, for Merleau-Ponty essences are necessary in order to become *aware of* and to speak about our facticity. As he remarks in the *Phenomenology of Perception*,

The need to proceed by way of essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but, on the contrary, that our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity.\(^9^9\)

\(^9^9\) PP, xvi.
Essences are not meant to abstract from experience but to draw our attention to the living relationships of experience, “as the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed.”

In *carnal essences*, Merleau-Ponty finds an approach to essences that does not separate them from existence nor reduce their genesis to a static nucleus, while making possible phenomenology as the “study of essences.” As Merleau-Ponty says,

The Wesen is a sense of radiation, connected to materials, ungraspable outside of the fact or outside of existence.

In the being of the individual thing, fact and essence are inseparable. The red dress has a certain generality, as it appears in a field of other red things, and yet it would not be the same red, were it not a silky red or a wooly red.

In keeping with his thesis of the primacy of perception, Merleau-Ponty rejects the concept of style as distorting mediation, an “appearance” to be contrasted with reality. Appearance is not error, but the expression of the thing’s way of being. As he explains,

When through the water’s thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without

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100 PP, xvii.
101 *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 51.
102 The red dress is “a punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms. And its red literally is not the same as it appears in one constellation or another…. (VI, 132)
103 “A colour is never merely a colour, but the colour of a certain object, and the blue of a carpet would never be the same blue were it not a woolly blue.” (PP, 365)
104 In his “Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch’s ‘The Field of Consciousness’,” Merleau-Ponty expresses the desire to “rework the very notion of style as speech of being, and not human construction.” (Merleau-Ponty, “Reading Notes,” 182.)
that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is— which is to say, beyond any identical specific place.\textsuperscript{105}

The water in the pool reveals the tiles at the bottom. While it may “distort” their pure geometry, this is only error if the in-itself is geometric. As a phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty seeks the essences \textit{in} appearances and not beyond or behind them. The water reveals the tiles as it “distorts” their geometry, revealing also a contrast between the static character of the tiles and the mobile character of the water. The ontology of style is an “indirect ontology”\textsuperscript{106}—that is, one that attempts to describe the being of beings as they unfold in time and existence, rather than rendering their being dependent on another being (“erecting a second positivity”) behind or beyond them, which would reduce all movement to a static form, all latency to positivity.

The ontology of the carnal essence attempts to account for the relationship between generality and particularity that the individual thing enjoys. In seeking the carnal essence, Merleau-Ponty is searching for a structure of the thing which, he explains,

\begin{quote}
shall express both its generality and its particularity… a relationship which shall be neither the reduction of form to content, nor the subsuming of content under an autonomous form.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

The concrete or full meaning is “bound by the existential conditions of its original context.”\textsuperscript{108} Things always give more than we expect, more than we could invent, more than we remember. There is much I did not notice when I was looking at the water before, when it was merely a medium for swimming, or a cool drink, that I only observe when I

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{105} EM, 142.
\textsuperscript{106} VI, 179: “One cannot make a direct ontology. My ‘indirect’ method (being in the beings) is alone conformed with being.”
\textsuperscript{107} PP, 145.
\textsuperscript{108} Dillon, “Gestalt Theory and Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Intentionality,” 444.
\end{footnotesize}
return to draw it. This is why Renoir returns to the water to paint, even though it is not fresh water. Yet style has such a generality that 376 years before Renoir folded up his easel and headed for the beach to interrogate the water, Leonardo was able to perform a similar interrogation and make his *Study of Water Passing Obstacles and Falling* (Fig. 3).

![Leonardo da Vinci, Study of Water Passing Obstacles and Falling, 1508-1509.](image)

*Fig. 3* Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of Water Passing Obstacles and Falling*, 1508-1509.
The style of the water is what allows me identify it as the same element if I encounter it later, without reducing its changing nature to a unity.\(^\text{109}\) In this way it functions somewhat like Husserl’s noematic nucleus.\(^\text{110}\) Yet it is not a unity, it is not static, and it is not opposed to the factual. Style is not a law which pre-exists its expression, but rather one which emerges through expression. As Renaud Barbaras says, it is not a style existing prior to the history of a living being and governing it, but a style of this history… a theme, but one that is never played for its own sake, but rather one that only appears in its own variations, namely, specific behaviours.\(^\text{111}\)

While the teleology of consciousness seeks a unitary object beneath the shifting appearances, this unity is not generative of the diversity, not found beneath it, but is a coherence that emerges through diversity. As Merleau-Ponty says, the Gestalt of the circle is not its equation but its physiognomy\(^\text{112}\)—that is, its style. The style of a thing is its way of unfolding itself in time, and not timeless rules according to which it will temporalize itself.

\(^{109}\) Dillon explains that style “allows one to identify an emergent unity without drawing an ontological line of demarcation between an immutable formal nucleus and accidental material periphery. With the development of the notion of style, essence (in both senses conveyed by the German Wesen and the Greek ousia) takes on new meaning.” (Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 79.)

\(^{110}\) Linda Singer observes that “Style is that which secures the harmonious flow of adumbrations which grounds the movement from the thing-seen-from-a-point-of-view to the things seen. In this sense style functions in a way analogous to Husserl’s concept of a noematic nucleus. Both concepts represent a response to the perspectivalism inherent in perception. Because the perceptual synthesis is always made on the basis of inadequate evidence, there has to be some structure that ensures the coagulation of the flow of appearances.” (Singer, Linda. “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style.” *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 241.)

\(^{111}\) Barbaras, “The Movement of the Living as the Originary Foundation of Perceptual Intentionality,” 530.

\(^{112}\) As Paul Klee says: “And every figure, every combination, will have its particular constructive expression, every form its face, its physiognomy. The pictures of objects look out at us, serene or severe, tense or relaxed, comforting or forbidding, suffering or smiling. They look out at us in all contrasts of the physical-physiognomic dimension; they can extend from tragedy to comedy.” Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 91 (italics mine).
As Merleau-Ponty says,

Although the Gestalt may be expressible in terms of some internal law, this law must not be considered as a model on which the phenomena of structure are built up. Their appearance is not the external unfolding of a pre-existing reason … it is the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility; it is the birth of a norm and not realized according to a norm…. The Gestalt of a circle is not its mathematical law but its physiognomy.¹¹³

The essence is not outside of time, it is not opposed to what is contingent or factical, it is not beyond or behind the thing. Rather it is the characteristic style of the thing in time, the rhythm of its radiation.

*Carnal essences* perform one other function of the *noema* in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. Not only do they provide the distinctive character of the thing (what for Husserl would be its objectivity), they also provide its *sense*. The style of a thing is a meaning which is not constituted by the subject, but which reveals itself in our bodily engagement with the thing. As Merleau-Ponty says,

The sensible has not only *a motor and vital significance*, but is nothing other than *a certain way of being in the world* suggested to us from some point in space.¹¹⁴

Things have the ability to suggest ways of being, styles of life to us through perception. The colours yellow and red favour stretching away from the body’s centre (*abduction*) and blue and green favour retracting towards it (*adduction*).¹¹⁵ This motor significance is accompanied by an affective one as things “dwell within us as emblems of forms of life

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¹¹³ PP, 70.
¹¹⁴ PP, 246 (italics mine.)
¹¹⁵ PP, 242-243.
we either love or hate." Merleau-Ponty’s account of the self, and of intersubjectivity. Another person is not primarily a mannequin for me. Rather, her character is given to me in her behaviour, in her style of being. She is “a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk.” The emotional states of another person are not behind or beyond their gestures but in them or, as he will later say, “between” them. “The gesture,” he writes, “does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.”

Like many of Merleau-Ponty’s concepts, the concept of style has its origin in his reading of Husserl. In Ideas II, Husserl puzzles over the unmistakable sense of another person, asking,

What is happening when the character-type of a person suddenly lights up for us through some one or other of his glances, positions, or expressions; when we, so to speak, “gaze into an abyss;” when the “soul” of the person suddenly “opens itself up;” when we “fathom wondrous depths;” etc.? What sort of “understanding” is that?

Yet for Merleau-Ponty, as for Nietzsche, the self is not an inner core that reveals itself in appearances, or that remains hidden in fathomless depths and accessible only by tunnel-

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117 PP, xvii.
118 Merleau-Ponty holds that the meanings of perceptual objects are given in perception: it is not the case that initially unstructured data are organized by means of antecedent meanings; it is, rather, the case that the sensuous contents of perception are given as meaningful from the very first. For more on this, see Dillon, “Gestalt Theory and Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Intentionality,” 444.
119 ILVS, 91.
120 PP, 214.
121 Husserl, Ideas II, 273/286.
ing deep into oneself through reflection. Rather, one’s character is expressed and formed through one’s actions, and does not pre-exist them. For Merleau-Ponty, you are just as much “the way you wear your hat, the way you sip your tea,” as what you are for yourself—a directness toward the world, a striving after certain projects, a transcendence. It is this strange mix of facticity and transcendence, this “conditioned freedom,” that characterizes our lives.

Style is not chosen. Pre-reflectively, a person’s style is as “as little visible to him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures”. When it is noticed, by an artist, for example, his style is often experienced as a barrier, a frustration. While striving to express something other to myself—for example, that tree, or your facial expression—everything comes out bearing the unmistakable stamp of my hand, my way of “patternning the world”, as inescapable as a fingerprint.

An important corollary of the concept of the carnal essence is that the appearance of a thing is no longer accidental, but rather the essential unfolding of its being. The style of a thing is expressed to all sensory modalities of the body. Colour, traditionally considered the most “subjective” form of appearance, is not a merely subjective impression or a

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122 See Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” 129: “How can man know himself? He is a thing dark and veiled; and if the hare has seven skins, man can slough off seventy times seven and still not be able to say ‘this is really you, this is no longer outer shell.’ Moreover, it is a painful and dangerous undertaking thus to tunnel into oneself….”

123 As Merleau-Ponty observes in “Film and the New Psychology” (in *Sense and Non-Sense*, 52): “We must reject that prejudice which makes ‘inner realities’ out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them.”

124 “Can’t Take That Away from Me,” George and Ira Gershwin.

125 PP, 528. We will return to this concept of conditioned freedom in Chapter 2.

126 ILVS, 90.

127 A professor of mine once observed that students in the process of copying Old Master portraits inevitably made the features of the faces more closely resemble their own. (See also ILVS, 102.)
qualitative trace of a quantitative causal action of the in-itself, but an expression of the phenomenon to the body. Colour is a result of the interaction between our body and the world, “the ‘place where our brain and the universe meet’.” Colour, line, texture, sound, flavour, smell are all expressions of the being of the phenomenon.

In reality, each colour, in its inmost depths, is nothing but the inner structure of the thing overtly revealed. The brilliance of gold palpably holds out to us its homogeneous composition, and the dull colour of wood its heterogeneous make-up. The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel, the hardness of a plane blade, the softness of shavings. The form of objects is not their geometric shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight. The form of a fold in linen or cotton shows us the resilience or dryness of the fibre, the coldness or warmth of the material.

In the lived body, the sensory fields intertwine to such a degree that perception is primordially synaesthetic. It is only with the benefit of the science of the human body that we learn to distinguish between our senses. My body as the “third term” between figure and ground allows the transposition of the visible into the tactile, the tactile into the audi-

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128 Colour could just as easily be considered a structure that results from the encounter between the subject and the world as a merely “subjective” phenomenon. While colour perception varies among species, this is does not prevent individual species from finding their food. Colour vision is not entirely illusory since part of what allows me to distinguish the fruit from the leaf is its colour. Here the truthfulness of my perception is not a coincidence with the in-itself, but an adaptive fit between body and world.

129 EM, 141.

130 PP, 266 (italics mine).

131 There is a “‘primary layer’ of sense experience which precedes its division among the separate senses.” (PP, 264)

132 CD, 65: “it is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses.”
tory, the auditory into the olfactory, the olfactory into the visible.\textsuperscript{133} “We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their \textit{odour}.”\textsuperscript{134} The unity of the thing and of the body is not effected by a synthesis but by an ambiguous overlapping of the various sensory modalities in which the thing comes to show itself in its own unique style.

(b) \textbf{Disegno vs. Colorito}

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty, line, colour, shape, texture are all expressions of the being of the thing. Yet traditional ontologies often elevate “certain properties of beings into a structure of Being”.\textsuperscript{135} The outline of a thing, for example, has often been thought to delineate its essence. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

There has been, for example, a prosaic\textsuperscript{136} conception of the line as a positive attribute and property of the object in itself. Thus, it is the outer contour of the apple or the border between the plowed field and the meadow, considered as present in the world, such that, guided by points taken from the real world, the pencil or brush would have only to pass over them….\textsuperscript{137}

If nature is geometric, this prejudice is understandable. For Descartes, the essence of an extended thing (\textit{res extensia}) is given by its geometric outline. For Locke, as we recall, line and shape are \textit{primary qualities} which are present in the object itself. Colour, on the

\textsuperscript{133} PP, 273: “My body is a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea.”

\textsuperscript{134} CD, 65.

\textsuperscript{135} EM, 142.

\textsuperscript{136} The prosaic is, in Merleau-Ponty’s parlance, the \textit{sedimented} rather than the primarily \textit{expressive} or poetic. Poetic, here is taken in the Greek sense of \textit{poiesis} as “making.” The prosaic outline is thereby opposed to the poetic line as generative axis. See also “Why should the expression of the world be subjected to the prose of the \textit{senses} or of the concept? It must be poetry; that is, it must completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen.” (ILVS, 89)

\textsuperscript{137} EM, 142.
other hand, is a secondary quality, a merely subjective simple idea caused by the primary qualities. Line for Locke is therefore closer to the nature of the thing than colour.

In the history of art, line has long been accorded a privilege withheld from colour. Given the prestige accorded to mathematical knowledge in the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti emphasized drawing (disegno) in his treatise On Painting as a way to raise the status of the mechanical arts. As the meaning of the word “disegno” includes not only drawing as an artistic activity, but also rational planning (like our English word ‘design’), disegno came to be linked in the popular imagination with divine forethought, and God as draftsman. In the High Renaissance, artists quarreled over which was better—drawing (disegno) which allowed for rational design, or colour (colorito), which allowed for the expression of subjective feeling. In the Baroque period, the cause of colour was championed by the Rubenistes, while that of line found its support with the Poussinistes. Line was thought to be more objective, while colour was thought to represent subjective experience.

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138 Strictly speaking, even shape is not devoid of the perspective of a perceiver. As Benoit Mandelbrot discovered when he tried, with difficulty, to measure the coastline of Britain, shape is a function of the level of detail required by the perceiver. The coastline of Britain will have a different shape and length depending on the unit of measurement. See Mandelbrot, Benoit. “How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension”, Science, New Series, Vol. 156, No. 3775 (May 5, 1967), 636-638.


140 The dangerous subjectivity of colour is perhaps best expressed in Balzac’s Frenhofer, whose painting is ultimately submerged in a roiling sea of colour as he himself gives in to inchoate and inexpressible emotion. (See Balzac, The Unknown Masterpiece.) Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the possibility of floundering in the subjective after unmooring oneself from tradition when he quotes Cézanne saying “Cézanne was moved to tears when he read Le chef-d’oeuvre inconnu and declared that he himself was Frenhofer.” (CD, 68) However, while the possibility of failure is inherent in the creation of anything new, this is not to suggest, as does Zola in The Masterpiece, that Cézanne ultimately fell short of his vision.
In the early nineteenth-century, one might think that line had won this great artistic debate, since it was the mastery of drawing—proportion, anatomy, perspective—that dominated artistic training in the influential French Académie des Beaux Arts.\textsuperscript{141} In rejecting the Academic insistence on the primacy of drawing in favour of the close study of colour in nature, the Impressionists were also rejecting the ontological primacy of the line. Colour supplanted line as the privileged visual element. As the famous statement attributed to Manet declares, “there are no lines in nature, only areas of colour, one against the other.”\textsuperscript{142} Nonetheless, in avoiding the stony rationality of intellectualism, we must not fall into the whirlpool of subjectivism.\textsuperscript{143} According to Cézanne, the emphasis on colour over line submerges the object beneath the impression.\textsuperscript{144} In their emphasis on the subjective and instantaneous impression Impressionism fell into a kind of psychologism, or subjective relativism. What is sought is not the object, but the instantaneous impression on the eye of the painter.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{141} Véronique Foti identifies this as a particularly Cartesian influence, saying “The Royal Academy, founded less than two decades after Descartes’ death, remained thoroughly Cartesian in its conviction that, in painting, colour, as a purely sensory element, must be subordinated to rational considerations” (Foti, “The Dimension of Color,” in Johnson, The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, 297). However, as I have indicated, the political desire of artists to advance their status as tradespeople to that enjoyed by the Liberal Arts through an identification of drawing with mathematics was already present in the time of Alberti.

\textsuperscript{142} This statement is commonly attributed to Manet, yet frequently without sources. It may be apocryphal.

\textsuperscript{143} In a delicious reference to Homer’s Odyssey, Forest Williams compares the task of finding a narrow straight between intellectualism and empiricism, Academicism and Impressionism, objectivism and subjectivism to Odysseus’ avoidance of the twin perils of Scylla and Charybdis, the sea monsters inhabiting a rock and a whirlpool respectively. See “Cézanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty.” in Johnson, The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, 172.

\textsuperscript{144} CD, 62.

\textsuperscript{145} The comparison between Impressionism and empiricism could perhaps be deepened by a consideration of Georges Seurat’s pointillism in which atomic points of colour are presented pure and unmixed upon the canvas, and combined synthetically in the eye of the viewer as sense data are unified by association.
Cézanne, by contrast, seeks the object, the essence that emerges in appearances, as the phenomenologist seeks the being of the phenomenon. As Merleau-Ponty says,

he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the colour, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement.  

Cézanne does not separate the line from the colour; rather both emerge at once. As he says, “as I paint I draw.” The essence of the thing is not in line only, but equally in line and colour.  

Beyond the objectivism of the French Academy, represented by the geometric outline, and the psychologism of Impressionism, represented by the pure subjective impression of colour, Cézanne is seeking the genesis of the visible. The essence of the thing as revealed in its way of appearing, as it forms itself from out of itself.

(c) Going Line

The meaning of a painting is not its represented subject matter, nor is its truth commensurate with the “accuracy” of its representation. As Merleau-Ponty says,

Modern painting, like modern thought generally, obliges us to admit a truth which does not resemble things…and which is nonetheless truth.

Following Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty identifies this truth as aletheia, the disclosure or unconcealment of being. Before the question can arise as to whether my concepts of things resemble things outside me, things first have to show up. As we have seen, beings

146 CD, 63.
147 EM, 141: “There is clearly no one master key of the visible.”
148 As Merleau-Ponty writes, “the apple and the meadow ‘form themselves’ from themselves.” (EM, 143)
149 ILVS, 94.
150 See IP, 118, 135, 137. See also Heidegger, Being and Time, 56.
disclose themselves to the perceiving body through their particular styles of being, their *carnal essences.* As Paul Klee observes, the artist is “more concerned with the formative powers than with the finished forms.” In the words of Klee:

The study of creation deals with the ways that lead to form. It is the study of form, but emphasizes the paths to form rather than the form itself. The word *Gestaltung* suggests as much. ‘Theory of form’ (*Formungslehre*) is too unusual. Moreover, *Gestaltung* in its broader sense clearly contains the idea of an underlying mobility, and is therefore preferable. For another thing, ‘Gestalt’ (over against form) means something more alive. *Gestalt* is in a manner of speaking a form which an undercurrent of living functions. A function made of functions, so to speak. The functions are purely spiritual. A need for expression underlies them.

*Gestalt* here becomes the forming, the *morphogenesis*, rather than the form. As the movement of water gathering towards the sea, as blood spreading through the veins to the extremities of the body, as sap moving through the tree all produce a branching form, form in nature is the result of movement.

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151 Klee, *The Thinking Eye,* 92.
152 Klee, *The Thinking Eye,* 17.
153 In Edward Burtynsky’s photograph of the Colorado River Delta (Fig. 5) the branching tree-like form of the water is especially apparent. This form is a result of the movement of the water. This movement is the *sens* of the river, as in Claudel’s statement quoted by Merleau-Ponty at the beginning of the Temporality chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception:* “Time is the sense of life (sense: as one says of the direction of a course of water, the sense of a phrase, the sense of a fabric, the sense of the sense of smell).” (PP, 476)
Fig. 4 Paul Klee, *Study of the Complementary Effect of Ribs and Leaf Shapes.* 
(From *The Thinking Eye*, p. 64.)

Fig. 5 Edward Burtynsky, *Colorado River Delta #2*, digital chromogenic print, 2011.
If the task of the artist is the expression of being, the answer is not to reject the line with the Impressionists, nor to copy the outline with the Academicians, but to free the line so as better to express the characteristic being of the thing. Merleau-Ponty describes a flexuous line which would be no longer merely a static outline but a generative axis—not a geometric outline, but a trace of the movement of growth, and the expression of the being of the thing as it emerges in its characteristic style. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

A line, as a trace of movement, must be a rhythm, a law, a law not only of an effective displacement in space, but of a field of possibilities, beyond probability.154

A line establishes a norm or a level to which all subsequent lines must respond, a primary figure-ground division on the blank page, which subsequent marks will modify. Rather than an entity, it is a slice, like Lucio Fontana’s cuts to the canvas, a “disequilibrium contrived within the indifference of the white page.”155 The line establishes a field of possibilities as the institution [Urstiftung] of subsequent lines.

The beginning of a line’s path establishes or installs a certain level or mode of the linear, a certain manner for the line to be and to make itself a line, ‘to go line’. Relative to it, every subsequent inflection will have a diacritical value, will be another aspect of the line’s relationship to itself, will form an adventure, a history, a meaning of the line.156

154 Notes de Cours 1959-61, 51 (translation mine).
155 EM, 144.
156 EM, 143.
In this way the line is the generative axis of the thing, like the stem of the apple, or the nerve of the leaf, and not its contour, a structural filament [nervure] which traces the style of its unfolding. In this way, the flexuous line no longer imitates but generates.

Henceforth, as Klee said, the line no longer imitates the visible; it ‘renders visible’; it is the blueprint of the genesis of things.

Merleau-Ponty identifies several strategies available to the artist who is inspired to trace the unfolding style of the visible world. Firstly, the artist can hold fast to the principle of the genesis of the visible, even if its lines of force render the entity unrecognizable, and leave it to the title to designate the prosaic name of the entity. Or, in the second case, to follow the adventure of the line through the prosaic identifying characteristics of the entity, while also delineating the “hidden operations” that constitute it as nude, face or flower.

That is to say, morphogenetic art can be either figurative or non-figurative. While the artist may be inspired by the carnal essences of nature, what she produces need not resemble them. Paul Klee compares the artist to a tree rooted in nature, sharing the same “sense of direction.” While nature sends its sap through the artist and directs the unfolding work, the crown of the tree (the art) need not resemble the roots (nature), as it spreads through another medium, that of pictorial art. The task of the artist sometimes

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157 VI, 119: “As the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered.”
158 EM, 144.
159 EM, 143.
160 EM, 143. Merleau-Ponty identifies the first alternative with Klee and the second with Matisse.
demands a departure from natural form, which is not a distortion, but its continued expression in the field of artistic sense.\textsuperscript{162}

Interestingly enough, while Merleau-Ponty initially entertains a criticism of abstract art as a “refusal of the world,” he amends this view in favour of an appreciation of abstract art as a way of breaking the ordinary ties between things in order to express their way of being.\textsuperscript{163} As he says in “Eye and Mind,”

The dilemma between figurative and non-figurative art is wrongly posed; it is at once true and uncontradictory that no grape was ever what it is in the most figurative painting and that no painting, no matter how abstract, can get away from Being.\textsuperscript{164}

Caravaggio’s grape is not the grape in-itself, nor is Klee’s fruit a pure invention. “It makes no difference if he does not paint from ‘nature’; he paints, in any case, because he has seen, because the world has at least once emblazoned in him the ciphers of the visible.”\textsuperscript{165} Often, the artist must break “the ‘skin of things’ to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world.”\textsuperscript{166} This need for innovation is not a denial of the world, but a response to the call for expression of its latent meaning.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{162} Klee, \emph{On Modern Art}, p.13-19.
\textsuperscript{163} ILVS, 93: “How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world? What does abstract art itself speak of, if not of a negation or refusal of the world? Now austerity and the obsession with geometrical surfaces and forms (or the obsession with infusorians and microbes; for the interdict put upon life, curiously enough, begins only with the Metakozoon) still have an odor of life, even if it is a shameful or despairing life. Thus the painter always says something. It is a new system of equivalences which demands precisely this particular upheaval, and it is in the name of a truer relation between things that their ordinary ties are broken.”
\textsuperscript{164} EM, 147. See also EM 128: “it makes no difference if he does not paint from ‘nature’: he paints, in any case, because he has seen, because the world has at least once emblazoned in him the ciphers of the visible.”
\textsuperscript{165} EM, 128.
\textsuperscript{166} EM, 141.
\textsuperscript{167} ILVS, 90.
IV. From Perception to Expression: The Logos of the Aesthetic World

In rejecting sense-bestowal, Merleau-Ponty does not fall into a form of realism in which sense would exist fully formed in Nature or the in-itself, ready to causally impact a passive subject and be subsequently “pressed out” through the expressive activity of the body.\textsuperscript{168} While perception brings me into contact with what is other to myself, it is through the intentional activity of the body that the thing is revealed. Paradoxically, the style of my intentional activity is informed by the style of the thing I wish to explore.\textsuperscript{169}

The style of my exploratory eye movements, or the way I move my hand so as to best feel a texture, is guided by the things. Smoothness and roughness depend on the exploratory movement of the hands and eyes.\textsuperscript{170} My eyes dart quickly over the dappled light of the water, or glide languidly along the curves of the willow tree. My hand slides over silk, plunges into fur, grasps wood.

How is it that the intentional attitudes of my body respond to the things they reveal? Once again invoking the seer’s paradox, Merleau-Ponty asks, what is this “inspired exegesis” of the thing, this “art of interrogating it according to its own wishes”?\textsuperscript{171}

I am able to touch effectively only if the phenomenon finds an echo within me, if it accords with a certain nature of my consciousness, and if the organ which goes out to meet it is synchronized with it.\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{168} Toadvine “Singing the World in a New Key: Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Sense,” 276.
\textsuperscript{169} Whitmoyer in “Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Ontological Lateness,” 151, makes a similar observation.
\textsuperscript{170} PP, 367.
\textsuperscript{171} VI, 133.
\textsuperscript{172} PP, 369.
If I do not move my hand in the right way, I will miss the smoothness of the silk, and the roughness of the wood. In this way the style of the world calls for the movements which will reveal its own sense. This is why, as Merleau-Ponty says, all perception “is already primordial expression,” a response to the spectacle it reveals.

Perception stylizes. As soon as I pick out one thing from the visual spectacle, I begin to differentiate it from the uniform ground from which it now stands out as figure, and from my past perceptions. Perception “affects all the elements of a body or behaviour with a certain common deviation with respect to some familiar norm that I have behind me.” The idiosyncratic style of the thing is first encountered as a difference in relation to the prior norms of perception. These prior norms of perception constitute the style of the world, its familiar way of being. Husserl in the Crisis calls this a “habit” of the world. As he says,

> The things of the intuited surrounded world … have, so to speak, their “habits”—they behave similarly under typically similar circumstances. If we take the intuitable world as a whole, in the flowing present in which it is straightforwardly there for us, it has even as a whole its “habit,” i.e. that of continuing habitually as it has up to now. Thus our empirically intuited surrounding world has an empirical over-all style.

173 PP, 367: “Smoothness and roughness “disappear completely if the exploratory movement is eliminated.”
174 For more on this, see PW, 78.
175 ILVS, 91: “There is style (and hence signification) as soon as there are figures and grounds, a norm and a deviation, a top and a bottom, that is, as soon as certain elements of the world assume the value of dimensions against which we subsequently measure all the rest and through which we indicate all the rest.”
176 PW, 60.
177 See also “Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch’s ‘The Field of Consciousness’,”
178 PP, 376: “The thing and the world, we have already said, are offered to perceptual communication as is a familiar face with an expression which is immediately understood.”
179 Husserl, Crisis, 31.
The world has an aesthetic coherence that we immediately recognize: if my coffee cup were to fall up instead of down, I would be surprised. It is this “cohesion without concept,”¹⁸⁰ this familiar way of being, that gives sense to the world.¹⁸¹

This is why when we encounter something which diverges from this norm, it may at first be experienced simply as non-sense. However, this differentiation can subsequently become a norm. Just as for the organism, what is encountered a posteriori can become its a priori: While the room appears slanted and “queer” before the establishment of the spatial level, and the light appears yellow-tinged before the establishment of the light level, afterwards all the parts of the visual spectacle arrange themselves in relation to what is now the zero degree of spatial orientation or light. When one element of the visual field takes on the value of a dimension, a level, this level “generates the aesthetic unity of the whole.”¹⁸²

For example, if I rotate a light source around an object, the colours and shadows re-distribute themselves accordingly. There is then a ‘logic of lighting’… a compossibility of the parts of the visual field … experienced as the consistency of the picture … a total logic of the picture or the spectacle, a felt coherence of the colours, spatial forms and significance of the object.”

What is initially strange, a divergence from what has previously been encountered, becomes a new norm, a part of the style of the world, and begins to direct the unfolding sense of the spectacle.

¹⁸⁰ VI, 152.
¹⁸¹ How is it possible for a certain colour to “clash” or for a certain herb not to “go” with a dish of food? What norm do they transgress? This norm is provided by the non-conceptual Logos of the aesthetic world. This “system of equivalences, a Logos of lines, of lighting, or colours, of reliefs, of masses—a non-conceptual presentation of universal Being” (EM, 142), is also what makes possible the dancer’s transposition from ear to limbs, the painter’s transposition from eye to hand, and the transposition from one art form to the other.
¹⁸² PP, 364.
As soon as this occurs, it begins to organize the visual field according to its vectors, drawing my body towards the further explication of its sense. I want to move closer, get a better look, angle my body so that I can better perceive it. In this way the sense of the spectacle is not in it but is called for by it. As Merleau-Ponty says,

Even though this truly pictorial style and meaning are not in the woman seen-for in that case the painting would be already completed—they are at least called for by her.... That convergence of all the visible and intellectual vectors of the painting toward the same meaning, $x$, is already sketched out in the painter’s perception. It begins as soon as he perceives.\(^{183}\)

For the painter, there is in the shape of things a familiar question, a call. The painter each morning “finds in the shape of things the same questioning and the same call he never stops responding to.”\(^{184}\)

It is this “latent meaning”\(^ {185}\) or “nascent logos”\(^ {186}\) in the perceptual world that directs the painter’s work. It is this style of the world that guides Cézanne in his search for his motif. As Cézanne observes, nature is constantly changing and yet always the same, so he joins her “aimless hands” to give a sense of both her eternity and her constant flux.\(^ {187}\) That is, he searches for her style of being to create another system of equivalents

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\(^{183}\) ILVS, 91 (italics mine).
\(^{184}\) ILVS, 95.
\(^{185}\) ILVS, 90.
\(^{186}\) Primacy of Perception, 25.
\(^{187}\) PP, 305. In Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature, Toadvine points out that the “aimless” character of Nature’s hands precludes a teleological interpretation. There are tendencies in Nature, but they are latent and do no lead in one pre-determined direction (103). Cézanne: “Everything we see is fleeting, isn’t it? Nature is always the same, but nothing about her that we see endures. Our art must convey a glimmer of her endurance with the elements, the appearance of all her changes. It must give us the sense of her eternity. What is beneath her? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. Everything, you understand. So I join her wandering hands…” (Conversations with Cézanne, p.110.)
on the canvas, a coherent composition, inspired by it in order to respond to “the question spread out through the world’s spectacle.”\textsuperscript{188}

When an element of the visual field takes on the value of a dimension, the painter finds in it “his momentary law.”\textsuperscript{189} It acts as a level and begins to direct the unfolding sense of the spectacle. The swirling wind over the asylum at Saint-Rémy lends its style to the trees and the grasses, bending them and twisting them in accordance with its swirling-being. The latent sense of the world “is capable of demanding that colour and that object in preference to all others ... it commands the arrangement of a painting just as imperiously as a syntax or a logic.”\textsuperscript{190}

The unfolding style of the visual field directs the painter’s own style to such an extent that the painter cannot tell “what comes from him and what comes from things,”\textsuperscript{191} what is a result of his expressive activity and what is that of things. The distinctive style of a painter develops “in the hollows” of his perception, which is already an expressive engagement with the world.\textsuperscript{192} It is not an imposition of subjective meaning on the world, an arbitrarily imposed distortion of the visual spectacle, but a response to the style of the world which his exploratory movements reveal. In expressing the things, he expresses himself.\textsuperscript{193}

Yet while the artist’s style is guided by that of the things, it is not necessitated by them. When he shows his rendition to others, others will see just as much of him in the work as of the trees and the grasses and the wind which so imperiously dictated their own

\textsuperscript{188} ILVS, 95.  
\textsuperscript{189} PP, 248.  
\textsuperscript{190} ILVS, 92.  
\textsuperscript{191} ILVS, 95.  
\textsuperscript{192} ILVS, 91.  
\textsuperscript{193} ILVS, 100.
expression to him just hours earlier. “It seems to him that he finds in appearances themselves the style which will define him in the eyes of others.”\textsuperscript{194} Others are not necessarily looking at the same things, they do not necessarily set out into the world with the same attitude, and are not necessarily inspired to take up the same carnal essences and move their bodies in the same way in response to their style.

In this way, perceptual meaning is neither actively imposed on the world by the perceiving body nor waiting ready-made in full positivity behind the scenes. As Merleau-Ponty says,

\begin{quote}
It is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins. It is, then, silent Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning.\textsuperscript{195}
\end{quote}

Perceptual meaning emerges in the reciprocal envelopment of an expressive body and an expressive world. In the next Chapter we will explore how the primordial expressivity of perception finds its maturation in the expressive activity of the artist.

\textsuperscript{194} ILVS, 93.
\textsuperscript{195} EM, 147.
Chapter Two:
The Genesis of Sense in Expression

The whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience.\textsuperscript{196}

\begin{quote}
Nature is a temple where living pillars,
Sometimes murmur confused words,
Man passes there through forests of symbols,
Which observe him with a familiar gaze.\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

I. Dancing the Orange: The Artist as Passive/Active

In the \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, Merleau-Ponty observes that Schneider never draws from the model.\textsuperscript{198} He feels the object, recognizes certain properties such as a corner or a right angle, and then produces an image corresponding to the verbal description of the object. Drawing for him is an intellectualist procedure conceived on the model of cognition. The world has no familiar physiognomy for him, no \textit{sense}, things do not express their carnal essences to him, and so Schneider can translate his perceptions into movements only via the express meanings of language. The normal subject, by contrast,

\begin{quote}
penetrates into the object by perception, \textit{assimilating its structure into his substance}, and through this body the object directly regulates his movements.
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{196} VI, 155.
\textsuperscript{197} Baudelaire, “Correspondances,” Selected Poems, 42 (translation mine):

\begin{quote}
La Nature est un temple, où de vivants piliers,
Laissent parfois tomber de confus paroles,
L’homme y passe, à travers des forêts de symboles,
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers...
\end{quote}
\textsuperscript{198} Schneider was a patient at Kurt Goldstein’s hospital for soldiers with brain injuries. As recounted in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, the impasses in Schneider’s perceptual experience due to his injury often reveal the functioning of normal perception. Merleau-Ponty’s use of deviation to reveal the operation of a norm is similar to Heidegger’s use of the broken hammer to reveal the normal functioning of equipment in \textit{Being and Time}.
\end{flushright}
This subject-object dialogue, this drawing together, by the subject, of the meaning diffused through the object, and, by the object, of the subject’s intentions—a process which is physiognomic perception—arranges round the subject a world which speaks to him of himself, and gives his own thoughts their place in the world.199

In the normal subject, the body is guided by the thing. As we have seen, things express their carnal essences, or ways of being to the perceiving body. In Eye and Mind, Merleau-Ponty returns to this notion when he says that the artist “lends his body” to the world.200 If the artist approaches the perceptual world in an attitude of openness (the painterly epochē), the artist’s body can become a vehicle for the expression of the thing.201 In this way things have their “secret and feverish genesis” in my body.202 This is possible because the style of the thing does not stay within it as a secret law, but radiates beyond itself,

If I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active living essence. This internal animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks under the name of depth, space, and color.203

This “radiation of the visible,” the fact that the thing expresses its style of being to the things around it, makes it possible for the artist to take up its style and express it anew.204

199 PP, 152 (italics mine).
200 EM, 123.
201 PP, 373: “The relations between things or aspects of things having always our body as their vehicle.”
202 EM, 128.
203 EM, 142. Translation modified in consultation with Carleton Dallery’s translation of “Eye and Mind.” The Primacy of Perception. 182. See also EM, 145: “all flesh, even that of the world, radiates beyond itself.”
204 EM, 126: “Things have their internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn’t these correspondences in turn give rise to some tracing rendered visible again, in which they eyes of others could find an underlying motif to sustain their inspection of the world? Thus there appears a “visible” to the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first.”
This is how it is possible to “dance the orange” with Rilke, being in turn recalcitrant with the rind…and ebullient with the juice!  

In my perception, unlike Schneider’s, there is a primordial intertwining between vision and movement. The perceptual field not only is spread in front of me as an image, but is also the field of my motor projects; it is the field not just of an ‘I see’ but of an ‘I can’. Movement is therefore the “natural sequel to, and maturation of, vision.” The perceiving body can take up the carnal essence of the thing and, drawing upon this fabric of “brute meaning,” in a gesture inspired by it can bring it to the expression of its own meaning.

Following Klee, Merleau-Ponty often uses the metaphor of a circuit to describe the relationship between perception and expression. The circuit arcs from the world through the body and is taken up in an active creative gesture. As he explains,

Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all aspects of Being. ‘A certain fire wills to live; it wakes. Working its way along the hand’s conductor, it reaches the canvas and invades it; then, a leaping spark, it arcs the gap in the circle it was to trace: the return to the eye, and beyond.’ [Klee] There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins. It is, then, silent Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning.

The artist is passive in the sense that she is situated in a world which she did not consti-

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205 Rilke. “Sonnets to Orpheus.” Trans. Robert Hunter, Stanza 15: “Dance the orange … your own concordat create with the pure, recalcitrant rind and the ebullient juice beneath the peel!”

206 EM, 124.

207 EM, 124.

208 EM, 123: “Art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operation- alism would prefer to ignore.”

209 EM, 147.
tute. Yet she is also active in the sense that this world calls for a response. In this way art is “an active operation that turns on something beyond itself to which it is passive”.

(a) Passivism

Merleau-Ponty’s artist in the moment of passivity would seem to be particularly open to aleatory art: the incorporation of chance into the process of creation. If the artist in the moment of passivity is, in the words of Oscar Wilde, “a stringed lute on which all winds can play,” would not chance be a highly effective way to allow the visible to express itself through the body of the artist?

Yet Merleau-Ponty criticizes the use of chance as exemplified by Surrealist automatism. In automatic writing and automatic drawing, the artist attempts to relinquish conscious control in order to allow the unconscious to speak. “Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else…. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject,” advises André Breton. Yet Merleau-Ponty objects that this kind of improvisation is too closely confined within the subject. It is the improvisation of:

childlike painters who have not learned their own gesture and who believe, under the pretext that a painter is no more than a hand, that it suffices to have a hand in order to paint. They extract petty wonders from their body as a morose young man who observes his body with sufficient complacency can always find some little peculiarity in it to nourish his private religion..

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210 PP, 496: “Passivity is not the acceptance by us of an alien reality, or a causal action exerted upon us from outside: it is being encompassed, being in a situation—prior to which we do not exist—which we are perpetually resuming and which is constitutive of us.”

211 Morris, “Merleau-Ponty, Passivity and Science: From Structure, Sense and Expression, to Life as Phenomenal Field,” 104.


213 Breton, André. “Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art,” Manifestoes of Surrealism, 29.

214 ILVS, 89.
For Merleau-Ponty this is a false passivity, or passivism. In pretending to a complete passivity in relation to the world, we ignore the active intentional aspect of our worldly involvement. Furthermore, this false passivity can enclose us within our own past. While passively allowing the unconscious to speak may free the Surrealist artist from artistic conventions, paradoxically, it can also become a way of becoming trapped in the “forest of symbols” of her own personal history, and of thereby denying her freedom.

Yet Merleau-Ponty does not dismiss improvisation entirely. There is also the improvisation that occurs in dialogue with the world. As he explains,

But there is also the improvisation of the artist who has turned toward the world that he wants to express and (each word calling for another) has finally composed for himself an acquired voice which is more his than his original cry. There is the improvisation of automatic writing and there is that of the Charterhouse of Parma.

Paradoxically, openness to the world can be a means of non-constitutive transcendence, a way of moving beyond one’s own characteristic style to embrace other possibilities for expression, as can openness to the inner logic of the work: one word calls for another,

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215 As Merleau-Ponty asks, “How to accept the past other than through a present decision that encloses us in it?” (IP, 118)
216 CD, 73. The reference to the “forest of symbols” is to Baudelaire’s wonderful poem Correspondences. It is a favourite image of the Surrealists. While Merleau-Ponty uses it here in connection to the unconscious, it is usually invoked in reference to language itself. See, for example, Breton, Mad Love, 15: “Interpretive delirium begins only when man, ill-prepared, is taken by a sudden fear in the forest of symbols.”
217 ILVS, 89.
218 As Merleau-Ponty explains in “Man and Adversity” (in The Merleau-Ponty Reader, 198): “The polemic against the critical faculties or conscious controls was not carried on in order to deliver speech up to chance or chaos; it sought to recall language and literature to the whole extent of their task by freeing them from the literary world’s petty formulas and fabrications of talent.”
as the Gestalt establishes a norm or law of its emerging order.²¹⁹ Allowing the work to develop in this way instead of girdling it with pre-expectations can serve as a means of expanding one’s artistic horizons. Merleau-Ponty therefore advises that Surrealism, seen in this light, not as complete passivity but as active-passivity, not as a turn towards nonsense but the expression of new sense, should not be judged too narrowly, but received as yet another call to “spontaneous speech”; that is, to primary expression.²²⁰

Merleau-Ponty’s painter is guided by the visible to move beyond her initial preconceptions about art and beyond her habits of making.²²¹ Yet this is an active passivity, as we see more clearly in “Eye and Mind” when, invoking Max Ernst, Merleau-Ponty effects a slight rapprochement with Surrealist automatism. As he writes:

Max Ernst (with the surrealists) says rightly, “Just as the role of the poet since [Rimbaud’s] famous Lettre du voyant consists in writing under the dictation of what is being thought, of what articulates itself in him, the painter’s role is to circumscribe and project what is making itself seen within himself”.²²²

Merleau-Ponty’s invocation of the Surrealist appropriation of Rimbaud is particularly interesting in light of the proto-automatist leanings of the most famous section of the Lettre du Voyant. Writing that the artist must be a seer, Rimbaud says:

For [I is an other]. If the brass awakes as horn, it can’t be to blame. This much is clear: [I assist at the hatching of] my thought: I watch it, I listen to it:

²¹⁹ “A line, as a trace of movement, must be a rhythm, a law, a law not only of an effective displacement in space, but of a field of possibilities, beyond probability.” Notes de Cours 1959-61. p.50 (translation mine).
²²⁰ “Man and Adversity,” 198.
²²¹ Painting is “a movement that germinates in the appearance, that is dictated by it” (Notes de Cours 1959-61, p.56; translation mine). We recall here Cézanne’s “germinating” with the countryside. (CD, 67)
²²² EM, 129.
I release a stroke from the bow: the symphony makes its rumblings in the depths, or leaps fully-formed onto the stage.\textsuperscript{223}

What is fascinating about this passage is that, at the moment of creation, where we expect pure activity, a self fully in possession of itself, an origin point of creation, something the artist did not fully intend comes into being \textit{through his intentional activity}. Rimbaud’s seer is active/passive. He performs an activity: he moves the bow of the violin, he waits, he listens, he assists at the birth of his thought, acting as midwife, preparing the way. But what emerges is somehow different from what he expected. Rimbaud’s seer is a medium for something \textit{other} to himself.\textsuperscript{224} Yet his passivity has an element of activity. As David Morris reminds us,

\begin{quote}
We cannot conceptualize passivity as a mere absence or deficit of activity. Passivity entails its own genus of being, in which we are non-sovereign, non-activist, yet not reduced to inertness.\textsuperscript{225}
\end{quote}

Just as I actively try to sleep by slowing my breathing until the “great lung”\textsuperscript{226} takes over, just as I must \textit{look} in order to \textit{see}, I must put myself in the right attitude for creation. I must be \textit{actively passive}, as in interrogation.

\textsuperscript{223} Rimbaud, “Letter to Paul Demeny, Charleville, 15 May, 1871.” \textit{Complete Works}, Trans. Wyatt Mason. 366. Translation modified. I have preserved the grammar of the French “\textit{Je est un autre},” [\textit{I is an other}] as well as Rimbaud’s “\textit{j’assiste}” [\textit{I assist}] rather than Mason’s more passive “\textit{I am present at}.” I have also preserved the specificity of the image of hatching in “\textit{l’éclosion de ma pensée}” rather than Mason’s more general “\textit{birth}.”

\textsuperscript{224} Rimbaud’s \textit{voyant} has not just the perceptual connotation of perceiver but the mystical connotation of the visionary. This openness to what is other to the self gives a quasi-mystical cast to Merleau-Ponty’s later concept of the body as a \textit{voyant-visible} (seer-seen).

\textsuperscript{225} Morris, “The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty,” 150.

\textsuperscript{226} PP, 245: “The relations of sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleeper to his slumber: sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath.”
In a manner reminiscent of the active passivity of sleep, Merleau-Ponty speaks of “inspiration” here, both in its traditional artistic sense, and in the ontological sense of being informed by the being of another thing:

We speak of “inspiration,” and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted.\(^\text{227}\)

The circular motion of interrogation, of question and answer, becomes the “respiration” of Being. The perceiving artist as passive/active is inspired by the carnal essences of things, taking their structure into her being, while the expressive artist as active/passive uses them as the basis for artistic expression (“expiration”).\(^\text{228}\) This reciprocal movement is the basis for expression itself.

(b) The Paradox of Expression

_Henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source, and, in the patient and silent labour of desire, begin the paradox of expression...\(^\text{229}\)_

Within the circular movement of inspiration and expression something _new_ is generated.

Expression is paradoxical in that for Merleau-Ponty, what is expressed does not pre-exist

\(^{227}\) EM, 129.
\(^{228}\) See also _Notes de Cours 1959-1961_, 186 (Translation mine): “The Letter of the Seer of Rimbaud. One often quotes the “deregulation of the senses” “I is an other,” we must quote other words: 1) “one thinks me”; 2) “the wood finds itself a violin.” 1) It is not a matter of no longer thinking- the deregulation of the senses is a matter of breaking the partition between [the senses] to rediscover their indivision- And in so doing, [to rediscover] a thought not mine but theirs- A contact with the total visible; 2) The wood finds itself a violin- As my body (here above) sees as visible my words resonating and singing, they are (from the visible, the sensible) that becomes expression. Things speak through me.”
\(^{229}\) VI, 144.
its expression either in the world or in the body. The work of art is not “the external unfolding of a pre-existing reason” but “the birth of a norm”.  

While the artist is inspired by the carnal essences of things, the wild meaning that emerges through her bodily response to their style, the work of art is not a translation of their meaning into another inert “medium,” but the site of a genesis of sense. As Merleau-Ponty says, “the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it”.  

Here Merleau-Ponty resists the traditional opposition of expression and expressed, form and content. Artistic expression is not the expression of something else.

Expression is not an incarnation of a meaning from elsewhere into meaningless materials, a painterly Sinngebung. It is not even the execution of the artist’s intended idea. As Merleau-Ponty says,

‘Conception’ cannot precede ‘execution’. Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be found there…

To express something new is not to translate a proto-art into art, whether this “proto-art” be thought, previous artworks or perception itself. Expression is not the “translation of a clearly defined thought.” To conceive artistic expression as the translation of a clearly defined thought would be to reduce primary expression—i.e., what has not yet been said,

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230 PP, 70.
231 PP, 213. Italics mine.
232 Just as the animation of the body is not “a question of a mind or spirit coming down from somewhere else into an automaton—which would still imply that the body itself is without an inside and without a ‘self.’” (EM, 125)
233 CD, 69.
234 CD, 69: “What he expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those which have already been said within ourselves or by others.”
even “internally”—to secondary expression—i.e., what has already been said.\textsuperscript{235} The artist who aims to institute a new sense must walk a thin line between chaos and cliché.\textsuperscript{236} If an expression is completely original, it will totally unintelligible, lacking the horizon of intelligibility provided by previous expressions. Like a shaman who goes mad in the desert, or like Balzac’s Frenhofer, adrift in a sea of colour in the age of line, the sense the artist aimed to bring into being will simply be non-sense to others, and the message will miscarry.\textsuperscript{237} On the other hand if the expression does not in some way move beyond what has been said already, if it merely repeats existing clichés, nothing will be said. As Waldenfels puts it, “Purely creative discourse would say nothing; purely repetitive discourse would have nothing to say.”\textsuperscript{238} This is the “silence” that surrounds all new expression that is in the process of coming into being.\textsuperscript{239}

Speaking of language, Merleau-Ponty says, “the expressive word does not simply choose a sign for an already defined signification.”\textsuperscript{240} Rather, it gropes around for a word which will “shake the chain of language” in the right way to satisfy an intention that is “not guided by any text.” Speech is not the translation of thought since speech and thought both have a “semantic thickness” such that they always signify in excess of their

\textsuperscript{235} PP, 207: “There is, of course, every reason to distinguish between an authentic speech, which formulates for the first time, and second-order expression, speech about speech, which makes up the general run of empirical language. Only the first is identical with thought.”

\textsuperscript{236} As Deleuze writes in What is Philosophy? (204): “artists struggle less against chaos … than against the ‘clichés’ of opinion.”

\textsuperscript{237} It is in order to avoid this risk that Kant tempers his theory of genius with exemplarity: that the genius serves as an exemplar for others means that he is not entirely beyond the realm of taste. This serves as a counterpoint to the sublimity of genius, the confrontation with the as yet unknown. Hegel confronted this sublimity when he describes the Romantic artist as one who attempts to express the Absolute through the most subjective means. This tragic situation of the artist is vividly explored in the play Red by John Logan.

\textsuperscript{238} Waldenfels, “The Paradox of Expression,” 92.

\textsuperscript{239} ILVS, 83: “we must consider … the background of silence which does not cease to surround [the word] and without which it would say nothing.”

\textsuperscript{240} ILVS, 83.
conventionalized relation between signifier and signified. According to Merleau-Ponty, “we all secretly venerate the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to things.” Yet words not only point to things, but they also have a kind of latent “halo” of meaning that comes from their participation in multiple fields of significance opened up by their history, uses, etymology, sounds, even the shape of their letters. Because of this, words can be put into relations with one another that cannot be easily anticipated by conventional significative relations, or in painting, by conventional representation through established iconography. They not only have a direct meaning, but an indirect meaning as well.

As we have seen, things express an indirect meaning through their carnal essences, or style. However this not only applies to what may inspire the act of creation- nature, people, artifacts- but also the very materials used to make the work of art itself. When the artist Robert Morris began to explore process as an important component of making, he began to object to the dualistic relation between form and matter in his earlier Minimalist work. According to Morris, the serial arrangement of Minimalist modular forms is an im-

241 “Man and Adversity,” 199: “the characteristic power that language as gesture, accent, voice, and modulation of existence has to signify in excess of what it signifies part by part according to existing conventions.”
243 “Man and Adversity,” 199. We are speaking of different ways in which words “shake the chain of language” (ILVS, 83). It is this circularity between intention and “medium,” this excess of meaning, this latency that leads Merleau-Ponty to speak of a “Flesh” of language. We could here speak of a Flesh of paint.
244 While the presence of a lily may signify the Virgin Mary, and a peacock the goddess Juno, the symbolic is a secondary use of artistic meaning. It is only because the lily has a style (white, fragrant, beautiful, light, soft) that can be connected with the attributes ascribed to the Virgin (purity, beauty etc), that such a comparison can be meaningful in the first place. Consider the dissonance that would result if the symbol of the Virgin were something random or incongruous such as a clod of earth, or a sharp rock.
245 ILVS, 84: “In already acquired expressions there is a direct meaning which corresponds point for point to figures, forms and established words. There are no apparent gaps or expressive silences there. But the meaning of expressions which are in the process of being accomplished cannot be of that sort; it is by lateral or oblique meaning which runs between words.”
posed order with no relation to the physicality of the existing units. As an alternative, Morris identifies a “phenomenological” form of making where “order is not sought in a priori systems of mental logic, but in the ‘tendencies’ inherent in a materials/process interaction”.²⁴⁶ He remarks admiringly that Jackson Pollock was able to make process an integral part of the resulting form.

![Fig. 6 Martha Holmes, Jackson Pollock Works in his Long Island Studio. photograph, Life Magazine, August 1949.](image)

As Morris explains,

The stick that drips paint is a tool that acknowledges the nature of the fluidity of paint. Like any other tool, it is still one that controls and transforms matter. But unlike the brush, it is in far greater sympathy with matter because it acknowledges the inherent tendencies and properties of that matter.²⁴⁷


²⁴⁷ Morris, “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making.” Continuous Project Altered Daily, 43. While Pollock’s early paintings were heavily influenced by Surrealist automatism, his drip
Matter has tendencies for Morris. A “tendency” is both a direction and a habit. Paint tends to flow, stone tends to break along a fault line, metal bends under weight. In process art, form is a result of these tendencies, and not imposed. Process art is an open dialogue with the materials; it is intentional, in that the materials are subjected to certain deliberate experiments, but open-ended, in that the end result is not prescribed in advance. If the objects on display must be arranged, loose orderings such as piles are preferred.

There is also a circularity between intention and process. What I freely created yesterday forms today the situation to which I must respond. Morris rejects prescribing the form as an idealized end. As he says, “the perpetuation of form is functioning idealism.” Yet neither is the process artist completely passive, just “a hand.” The process artist is active/passive. As Morris explains, “the artist has stepped aside for more of the world to enter into the art. This is a kind of regress into a controlled lack of control.” In a controlled openness to the tendencies of materials, the process artist can open up new possibilities for artistic expression. As Merleau-Ponty says, the work of art “is genesis par excellence; it never presents itself as a finished product.”

Paintings could be said to enact a kind of material automatism, in which the material, and not the unconscious, is allowed to speak through the relinquishing of conscious control. Yet this seeming passivity is also active, as emphasized by Harold Rosenberg in his “The American Action Painters” (1952). As Rosenberg says, the canvas is “an arena in which to act” and painting is an “event” (25). Interestingly enough, according to Robert Hobbs (2001), Rosenberg’s highly influential essay was a result of a close correspondence between Harold Rosenberg and Merleau-Ponty, and was originally intended to appear in Les Temps Modernes. When Merleau-Ponty resigned from the editorial board of the journal, Rosenberg decided not to submit it there for publication. It was published instead in Art News in 1952. Hobbs argues that this shows an influence of Merleau-Pontian thought on American art a full ten years before the English translation of Phenomenology of Perception became available in 1962. (See Hobbs, Installations: Mattress Factory 1990-1999, 18.)

250 W. Grohman, cited by Merleau-Ponty in Notes de Cours 1959-61, 56 (translation mine).
It is because of this circularity between intention and process, form and matter, that Merleau-Ponty is not a formalist. According to Merleau-Ponty, rather than locating meaning on the side of the things, formalism makes form either into an arbitrary signifier or a symbol, drawing its meaning from its relation to something else.\footnote{251} As he explains,

\begin{quote}
It is certainly right to condemn formalism, but it is ordinarily forgotten that its error is not that it esteems form too much, but that it esteems it so little that it detaches it from meaning.\footnote{252}
\end{quote}

While formalism rightly distinguishes between the meaning of the work and its represented “content,” it still locates meaning in an activity of the subject, detaching it from the formal properties of the painting. Yet since form is the expression of being of the thing, its style, it is already meaningful, it does not need to derive its meaning from an arbitrary connection to some other content. There is no “content” beyond or behind the form, of which it is the adequate or inadequate expression. Rather, there is a reversibility between form and content. “Form integrates within itself the content until the latter finally appears as a mere mode of form itself.”\footnote{253} This process is not a manifestation of a pre-existing form through content, since content informs the form as well.

Like the circular relation between motor intentionality and the world, my intention to create a work of art enters into a circuit with the “medium,” the field of other expressions, and the Gestalt of the evolving work, not only forming them, but being formed by them as well. Artistic intention is therefore “in a relationship of reciprocal exchange

\footnote{251}{This relation could be conventional as in the case of the sign, or could stem from some slight resemblance, as in the symbol.}
\footnote{252}{ILVS, 114.}
\footnote{253}{It is this circularity between form and content that Merleau-Ponty initially seeks in the concept of the carnal essence: “a relationship which shall be neither the reduction of form to content, nor the subsuming of content under an autonomous form.” (PP, 146)}
with the instruments which it uses … rendering to them what it has received from them and more.”

Primary expression is therefore not the actualization of existing possibilities of expression within a given “medium,” but as David Morris describes it, the “re-possibilization” of that medium. As Morris observes,

actuality is not subsequent to possibility, but contemporaneous with and creative of it, whereas in our usual concept possibility precedes its actualization.

Joyce’s use of the English language, his neologisms and onomatopoeia, creates new possibilities for its use, beyond the conventional connection between signifier and signified. While speaking means entering into a horizon of language in such a way that language can be said to “speak us,” doing so also means changing that horizon, and in so doing opening up new possibilities for speech. Cézanne’s expression of space opens up new possibilities for the spatiality of painting which can be taken up by other artists, such as Picasso.

That is all to say, while the artist is open to what is other to herself, and may become a vehicle for the expressive being of things, expression is still an institution, an active/passive creation of something new. The artist is intentionally directed towards the completed work, and in this way expression is futural. Yet she is directed towards an end

257 Although Merleau-Ponty quotes Heidegger’s “speech speaks” [die Sprache spricht], he clarifies that this should not be taken to mean that speaking is a pure passivity to an “agency behind the words,” or a language mysticism. (See Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, 51, and Heidegger, Poetry, Language Thought, 190.)
end which is as yet indeterminate. Before expression there is only a “vague fever,” and not the complete work in germ. And yet there is still a goal, a task to be accomplished, and Van Gogh can speak of going “still further.” Like Plato in the *Meno*, we may ask how we can know we are finished creating when we did not know before we began how it would turn out. How do we know when we’ve found what we didn’t know we sought? Expression proceeds according to a peculiar teleology that does not know its own end. As David Morris puts it,

I do not know what I want to say until I figure out how to express it. What I want to express is thus not yet there at the beginning of expression; nonetheless, when I do figure out what I want to say, I realize this was what I wanted to express all along.

The circularity of expression appears because expression is directed towards a goal which will change the meaning of the striving itself by showing that there was “something rather than nothing to be found there.” This is the origin of the retrospective illusion that the artist chooses, like Matisse’s hand slowed down on film in the act of creation, like Leibniz’s God, the best of all possible lines. After the work has been completed, it may seem as though it was inevitable, since every stroke of the brush *tended* towards a whole.

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258 In this, Merleau-Ponty moves closer to Kant’s *purposeless purposiveness*.
259 EM, 123.
260 Morris invokes the seeker’s paradox from Plato’s *Meno* (80d) to highlight the paradoxical nature of interrogation. (“The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty,” 152.) As Merleau-Ponty notes, “Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.” (PP, 33)
262 CD, 69.
263 ILVS, 83.
which did not yet exist.264 Yet each mark, once made, has an effect on the evolving whole, like a note in an improvised melody, such that it calls for another mark.265 The next mark is as much a response to the last, as it is to the anticipated whole, which alters slightly with every mark, shifting imperceptibly away from the originally intended work.

Because of this circularity between intention and “medium,” primary expression and the field of other paintings, brush stroke and the Gestalt of the evolving work, expression is not pure activity, but activity/passivity. As Waldenfels reminds us, expression is neither “pure action and pure creation of newness” nor “pure passion and pure reproduction.”266 This is Merleau-Ponty’s way of resisting the antinomy of technē and poiesis, copying and invention, which has dominated aesthetic reflection in the West since at least Plato’s Ion.267 The artist’s creation is not a pure freedom, a genius outside of time and tradition, untaught, uninfluenced, absolutely originary, acting ex nihilo. Nor is creation merely the causal result of a tradition of making, the student’s passive submission to the learning of rules and skills, the imitation of nature, or the copying of plaster casts of the

264 PW, 45: “there was a choice, that the stroke was chosen so as to satisfy ten conditions scattered on the painting, unformulated and unformulable for anyone other than Matisse, since they were defined and imposed only by the intention to make this particular painting which did not yet exist.”
265 PW, 44: “Painting has two sides: there is the spot of color or stroke of charcoal one puts on the canvas or paper, and there is the effect of this spot on the whole."
266 “The Paradox of Expression,” 92.
267 Plato’s Ion famously asks the question whether poetry is teachable (a technē), or, as he ultimately concludes, a result of divine madness. The historical debate between those who see art as teachable and those who see it as a result of “genius” is long and fascinating. See Mitscherling, DoTommaso, and Nayed, The Author’s Intention, for a captivating discussion of this history from Plato and Longinus to Gadamer, Eco and Foucault. This debate also emerges in Hume’s On the Standard of Taste in the form of an argument against the “rules of art” and in Kant’s Third Critique in the antinomy of taste (beauty as subjective vs. objective), the denial that aesthetic judgement is based on a concept, and in his concept of genius as “exemplary originality.” Kant, in the concept of exemplarity recognizes that the artist initiates a tradition, however he does not recognize that he is part of one; in genius it is “nature” that gives the rule to art. Merleau-Ponty’s account is an attempt to give a more situated version of artistic freedom.
Old Masters as in the French Academy. Rather, as we respond to a cultural-historical field of possibilities which precedes the creative act, we alter that field itself.

It is the observation that the artist’s activity is also a passivity that renders Merleau-Ponty’s notion of primary expression invulnerable to Rosalind Krauss’ famous attack on the originality of the avant-garde. Krauss argues that while the ideology of the avant-garde claims originality as the basic condition of creation, avant-garde practice is often derivative, involving the repetition of certain formal structures such as the grid. As Krauss explains:

More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth.

Yet as we have seen, even birth is not fully active, as it “does not constitute its own conditions of activity.” Before birth, there must be (at least) a pre-personal body capable of birthing, and another member of the species also capable of procreation, just as in artistic creation there must be a field of sense, a world. While Krauss’ avant-garde artist is autochthonous, self-born like Marinetti after his car accident, emerging from the water of the factory ditch, “as if from amniotic fluid to be born—without ancestors—a futurist,” Merleau-Ponty’s artist is born of the world, the pre-personal field of sense.

Krauss’ objection that the practice of vanguard art proceeds by repetition is inconclusive, since Merleau-Ponty’s artist does not require the complete negation of history to proceed. If what the avant-garde artist uncovers in “discovering” the grid is the basic

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268 See Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.”
270 Morris, “The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty,” 149.
272 Krauss, “Originality,” 157: “the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that “originality” is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence.”
assumption of Euclidean space underlying the narrative conceits of earlier painting, so much the better. It is characteristic of the paradox of expression that just when we think we are at our most original, we discover just how tied we are to the world of which we form a part.

Yet it is often necessary to remind ourselves of this cultural-historical world, of our situation, of the field of culture beyond us to which we respond. It is because of this that such critiques of the claim to total originality are needed. They are, in a certain sense, parallel to Merleau-Ponty’s own critique of meaning as a centrifugal act of Sinngebung. To further articulate this theme, in our next two subsections—(c) and (d) of this Part (I) of Chapter Two—we will be more closely examining the work of art as an institution [Stiftung] against the double horizon of the past and future, the world and the telos [Endstiftung] sought by tradition.

(c) Conditioned Freedom

Contemplating a photograph of Cézanne’s studio (Fig. 7), I imagine him there, among the bottles, fruit and skulls, animating this space from within. There is a tendency to try to locate the meaning of an artist’s work in his biography or in the artifacts of his life. We think, “perhaps if I visit her house, now preserved as a museum, or if I read his letters to friends, I can find some shred of meaning to illuminate my experience of the work.” While this approach has the advantage of recognizing the human reality of the artist’s life, an unfortunate side effect can be a deterministic approach to art history.
Yet art is not simply a causal result of the artist’s life, a kind of *symptom*, since it is also a *response* to that facticity. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, the meaning of Cézanne’s painting is not in his hereditary character traits such as his schizoid temperament.²⁷³ Nor is El Greco’s astigmatism responsible for his elongated figures.²⁷⁴ To reduce the meaning of an artwork to the facts of the artist’s biography is to overlook its *sense*, its striving in freedom in favour of his facticity. An artist’s situation is not his whole life, but only “the text which nature and history gave him to decipher.”²⁷⁵

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²⁷³ CD, 71.
²⁷⁴ SB, 203.
²⁷⁵ CD, 70.
Freedom is not the autonomy of an internal essence striving against external constraint, since our action only has meaning against the horizon of a situation. This situation is not an alien milieu through which he passes unchanged.

Passivity is not the acceptance by us of an alien reality, or a causal action exerted upon us from outside: it is being encompassed, being in a situation—prior to which we do not exist—by which we are perpetually resuming and which is constitutive of us.

Yet our goals, projects and aspirations also create a future horizon of significance such it is equally possible to say that “that work to be done called for that life”. Our freedom is always a “conditioned freedom”, conditioned by our past and our future. Such is “the circular movement of our lives, where the future rests on the past, the past on the future.”

It is within this circular movement that the advent of expression occurs. It is a genesis of a sense which cannot be found ready-made either in the artist’s past, or in the glorious artistic successes which they hope await them in the future, in the world, or in the artist’s life. As Merleau-Ponty says,

The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere: not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life.

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276 PP, 514: “Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it: as long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls up specially favoured modes of resolution, and also that it is powerless to bring one into being by itself.”

277 PP, 496.

278 “But let us make no mistake about this freedom. Let us not imagine an abstract force which could superimpose its effects on life’s “givens” or cause breaches in life’s development. Although it is certain that a person’s life does not explain his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected. The truth is that that work to be done called for that life” CD, 70.

279 CD, 75. See also VI, 267: “time as chiasm.”

280 CD, 69.
Just as meaning in perception emerges within the reversible relation between the body and the world, the meaning of an artwork emerges between advent of expression between the artist’s freedom and the situation to which she responds.\(^\text{281}\) That is, in a temporal reversibility between past and future, future and past.

(d) **Institution, Sedimentation and the Historicity of Art**

*There is no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and of geography.*\(^\text{282}\)

In keeping with the circular movement of conditioned freedom, Merleau-Ponty proposes a new way of thinking of art history. On the one hand, the task of the painter is inherited.\(^\text{283}\) Through artistic education within an artistic tradition we are inducted into a pictorial telos, such as the Renaissance desire for anatomical verisimilitude, the Baroque pursuit of the enigma of light, or the Greenbergian Modernist’s march towards medium-specific purity. Yet while the artist may believe she is simply carrying on an existing tradition or, guided by the carnal essences, simply bringing things passively to the expression of their own latent meaning, her action secretly inaugurates another tradition.\(^\text{284}\)

\(^{281}\) In his political writings, Merleau-Ponty proposes “intervention” as an invention that occurs between subject and a world, as an alternative to Sartre’s “commitment” of the intellectual to a situation which still maintains the Kantian distinction between the autonomy of the subject and the heteronomy of the world. See *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 23.

\(^{282}\) VI, 115.


\(^{284}\) ILVS, 97.
Merleau-Ponty uses Husserl’s term *Stiftung* (institution)\(^{285}\) to refer to the foundation of a stable cultural sense that has the power of directing future cultural activity. Merleau-Ponty describes institution in the following way:

Thus what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or a history—or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future.\(^{286}\)

Institution establishes new senses and meanings through the laying out of a field of possibilities in the life-world, and the articulation of a goal and direction. Institution opens up a future horizon to which it aspires. As Husserl says, “to every primal establishment [*Urstiftung*] essentially belongs a final establishment [*Endstiftung*] assigned as a task to the historical process.”\(^{287}\) For example, in geometry, this final establishment is the clarification of the limit-shape (circle, square, etc.) which measurement aims to approximate.

The institution of geometry occurs against the horizon of significance provided by the life-world. Measurement is important because we live in a world in which it is useful to calculate distances for highways, angles for building, and so on, yet institution inaugurates a new ideality that allows for a stability of meaning and inter-subjective reference. Out of the shapes given in perception, geometers are able to abstract certain features—

\(^{285}\) *Stiftung* is variously translated as “institution” (in Merleau-Ponty’s work), “establishment” (in the translations of Husserl’s *Crisis* and *Origin of Geometry*) and “foundation” (in translations of Derrida’s *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry*).

\(^{286}\) *Themes from the Lectures*, 40.

\(^{287}\) Husserl, *Crisis*, 72.
surfaces, edges, lines, angles, points—to form geometric idealizations and limit-shapes which measurement aims to approximate.\textsuperscript{288}

In this way, institution allows for the genesis of sense that is inter-subjectively accessible, that “makes sense without me.”\textsuperscript{289} Cultural ideas, once they have been instituted, can be experienced and understood by multiple people across historical time. While they may appear autonomous after they have been instituted, as if they had simply waited patiently to be discovered, they depend on an act of expression in order to be brought into being. As Merleau-Ponty says, the pencil, the Ninth Symphony and the triangle are cultural ideas with a history. If all pencils were to be destroyed, all copies of the Ninth Symphony and all musical instruments burnt to a crisp, and all cultural instruments that carry on the tradition of the triangle were to be eliminated, these ideas would have to be instituted anew.\textsuperscript{290}

The institution of a cultural idea derives its sense from an existing cultural field that makes such action meaningful. Yet artistic influences, or inherited traditions and techniques, are not linear causal determinants, but horizon structures that provide the historical situation to which the artist responds. While the artist is in many ways passive to the tradition as a pre-reflective field of sense, she responds actively and in so doing gen-

\textsuperscript{288} Husserl, \textit{Origin of Geometry}, 376.
\textsuperscript{289} IP, 8: “To constitute in this sense is nearly the opposite of to institute: the instituted makes sense without me, the constituted makes sense only for me and for the ‘me’ of this instant.”
\textsuperscript{290} PP, 453: “That which is called an idea is necessarily linked to an act of expression, and owes to it its appearance of autonomy. It is a cultural object, like the church, the street, the pencil or the Ninth Symphony. It may be said in reply that the church can be burnt down, the street and pencil destroyed, and that, if all the scores of the Ninth Symphony and all musical instruments were reduced to ashes, it would survive only for a few brief years in the memory of those who had heard it, whereas on the other hand the idea of the triangle and its properties are imperishable. In fact, the idea of the triangle with its properties, and of the quadratic equation, have their historical and geographical area, and if the tradition in which they have been handed down to us, and the cultural instruments which bear them on, were to be destroyed, fresh acts of creative expression would be needed to revive them in the world.”
erates new sense. As David Morris says, “institution precisely names a process that generates sense without yet constituting it in a wholly active manner.” Like expression, institution is active/passive.

The circular movement which has become familiar to us through our analyses of the relation of the body to the world, intention and process, is present here as well. Instituted meanings do not merely thematize and make explicit the pre-reflective meaning of the life-world. They also “flow” back into the life-world and change that meaning itself. As Merleau-Ponty says, “life becomes ideas and the ideas return to life.” Instituted ideas form the basis for later pre-predicative encounters. Since cultural achievements such as scientific theories “flow” back into the life-world, they change the way things are perceived. After the institution of geometry, the trunk of the tree will always be a circle, as if “the trunk of the tree had the properties of the circle before the circle was known.”

Precisely the element of ideality that allows for works of art to be experienced by multiple people at different times can allow a work to stagnate into a false positivity, into something that everybody knows about, but no one needs to look at. As institutions become sedimented into our pre-reflective encounters with the world, what were creative transformations of the life-world may become assumptions, or received opinion (doxa).

Sedimentation allows primary expression to give way to secondary expression through consistently referring to a fixed referent. Yet it also eliminates the halo of sig-

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292 VI, 119.
293 IP, 52. Husserl in the Crisis calls this a substruction, a placing of idealizations which derive from the life-world beneath it. In IP Merleau-Ponty calls it a “retrospective illusion.”
294 As M.C. Dillon says, “sedimentation allows a transcendence of the signifier toward the signified.” Yet where Dillon argues that this confers a privilege on language over painting since “one does not see through the painting to its meaning as one does in language,” as we have seen, the meaning of painting is not given through its “content” or subject matter – reclining woman, cow
nificance of primary expression, the “excess of what we live (beyond what has already been said).” Sedimented expressions become like worn coins on which the faces have become effaced; their fecundity of meaning decreases in inverse proportion to their easy exchangeability.

In the *Crisis* and the *Origin of Geometry*, Husserl seeks to re-activate the sedimented tradition by recalling the foundation of that tradition, in order to understand its meaning for those who created it. Language as a system of stable idealities grants us access to the ideas of the founders of tradition. We can read the writings of the “subjects of historicity,” those who create cultural formations such as geometry. Husserl returns to the writings of Galileo in just such an attempt to reactivate the historical meaning of geometry that has become sedimented in modern scientific objectivism and has become separated from its meaning and origin in the life-world.

Where one might expect Merleau-Ponty to follow Husserl in advocating a re-activation of the historical tradition through an excavation of its origins in the life-world, Merleau-Ponty takes a different approach. Firstly, for Merleau-Ponty, sedimentation and the forgetfulness of origins is not a defect of ideality to be overcome. Rather, it is “constitutive of ideality.” That is, it is through sedimentation that the latent meaning of the

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295 ILVS, 120.
298 Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 57.
life-world can be crystallized into cultural ideas in the first place. There is always an excess of what could be expressed, what is called for by the latent meaning of the life-world, beyond what has been expressed by this particular work. In making a work of art, I must make aesthetic choices that exclude other possibilities: I cannot say everything, and if I try, I risk saying nothing, and lapsing back into silence.\textsuperscript{299} From among an indefinite number of possibilities, I choose one. I stabilize certain meanings from the flux of their continual genesis in the life-world, so that I can share them with others. In this way I sediment the latent meaning of the world.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty has serious doubts about the possibility of reactivation. It is through reflection that we become aware of the pre-reflective in the first place.\textsuperscript{300} Yet reflection does not only reveal, it also brings with it assumptions of its own. Every time we excavate into the origins of tradition, we deposit new sediment, new assumptions from our own historical time period made possible by the continuation of the tradition itself. Since the pre-reflective is always sedimented with the products of reflection, it is not the actual past of reflection, but “a past that has never been a present.”\textsuperscript{301} Because of this, a complete historical reduction is impossible.\textsuperscript{302} We cannot return to a “pure” perception before the institution of our cultural tradition, since this tradition forms the horizon of intelligibility for our perception itself. The whole landscape is overrun with language and culture, “as with an invasion.”\textsuperscript{303} Merleau-Ponty advocates a kind of hyper-reflection which would “also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle

\textsuperscript{299} This is why painting is an “endless task,” and why Cézanne thought he was powerless because he was not God. See CD, 69.
\textsuperscript{300} Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” in \textit{Signs}, 161.
\textsuperscript{301} PP, 282.
\textsuperscript{302} See PP, xv.
\textsuperscript{303} VI, 155.
into account”.304 Yet since “our reflection on the flux is actually inserted into the flux,” this can only occur retrospectively, as part of an ongoing process.305 While the ideality of institutions provides some resistance to historical change through providing a fixed referent, the meaning of an institution changes through the process of reflection and sedimentation. Because of this, as Bettina Bergo puts it, “total reactivation of that historic tradition is neither possible nor desirable.”306

This is why Merleau-Ponty’s invocation both of the “wild meaning”307 of the life-world and of the importance of primary expression is not a kind of primitivism.308 We cannot neutralize the effects of culture or strip away the “garb of ideas”309 from our experience of the life-world. If this were possible, the results would be unintelligible and meaningless, since the cultural-historical life-world provides the horizon of significance for experience itself. Even primary expression derives its sense from the cultural-historical life-world, from the artistic and intellectual tradition, even while it changes that very tradition itself. Because of this, any claim to return to a “pure” perception operative

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304 VI, 38.
305 PP, 495.
306 Bergo, “Philosophy as Perspectiva Artificialis: Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Husserlian Constructivism” (the Afterword to Husserl at Limits of Phenomenology), 167. See also Merleau-Ponty in this same book, 65: “Sedimentation (‘secondary passivity’) is a danger (the seduction of language). But can we reactivate everything? In fact it is impossible.” See Husserl, Crisis, 362, regarding the seduction of language.
307 In the theme of “wildness,” Alphonso Lingis identifies an allusion to Claude Levi-Strauss’ La Pensée Sauvage (translated as The Savage Mind); see VI, 13, n. 6.
308 That is, the fetishization of the art of children, the insane or so-called “primitive” peoples in the name of a more authentic expression. As Krauss et al. point out (Art Since 1900, vol. 1. 66), this tendency is historically problematic, as the fascination with “primitive” cultures often accompanies historical conquests and imperialist expansion. Primitivism often removes art objects from their historical and cultural contexts, and attributes their power to a more direct connection to the well-spring of creation, unpolluted by tradition, ignoring the traditional and often ritualistic place of such objects within the society from which they came. Merleau-Ponty rejects the obsession with so-called “primitive” art in “Expression and Children’s Drawing” (in The Prose of the World) and “The Child’s Relations with Others” (in The Primacy of Perception). See also VI, 182: “‘Primitivism’ is only the counterpart of scientism, and is still scientism.”
309 Husserl, Crisis, 51.
before language or culture is a false naïveté, a passivism that denies the role of culture and history in the intentional structuring of the perceptual field.

Traditions form the horizon of significance for the things that appear. As a field of sense, traditions lay out vectors of meaning which our activity may unconsciously follow. For Merleau-Ponty this is not a negative conception of opinion (doxa) as that which must be overcome in favour of knowledge, but the perceptual faith and horizon of sense necessary for all our activity.\(^{310}\) This is why, instead of advocating the reactivation of the origin of a tradition such as geometry or linear perspective through the phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a positive forgetfulness of institutions that continue in the same vein, often while forgetting the explicit origin of their historical project.

[There is at once] positive forgetfulness and negative forgetfulness. Conquest of sense and evacuation of sense, realization which is also destruction. Every institution involves this double aspect, end and beginning, Endstiftung at the same time as Urstiftung. That is what sedimentation is: trace of the forgotten and thereby a call to thought which depends on itself and goes farther.\(^{311}\)

It is a curious feature of horizon structures that they are most effective when they escape explicit attention. “Precisely because we owe so much to tradition, we are in no position to see just what belongs to it.”\(^{312}\) Traditions form the horizon of intelligibility for future cultural contributions. When he shatters the fruit bowl in order to flay space, Cézanne

\(^{310}\) As Toadvine observes, Merleau-Ponty objects that for Gurwitsch “possibility and transcendence are understood only negatively from an eidetic perspective, that is, as unfulfilled essences” (Toadvine, 200). This implies a negative conception of the horizon of the lifeworld based on a conception of the essence as a fully positive unity rather than as “a divergence within the corporeal field of things” (Toadvine, 200). By contrast, for Merleau-Ponty the lifeworld has a positive connotation as the source of originary opinion (Urdoxa), and as the horizon of sense. See Toadvine, “Phenomenological Method in Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Gurwisch,” and Merleau-Ponty, “Reading Notes on Gurwitsch.”

\(^{311}\) IP, 58.

\(^{312}\) “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” Signs, 159.
does not break absolutely with the unified space of classical perspective. Rather, he takes up the ancient and Renaissance problem of the expression of space by other means.\textsuperscript{313} Even though his painterly epoch is of necessity incomplete (perspective, once learned, cannot be totally forgotten), Cézanne can take up the historical task of expressing space in another way. In this way painting is “a personal institution that resumes collective institution.”\textsuperscript{314}

The historical project of interrogating space lays out a field of sense in which later interrogations of space, from Cézanne to Picasso to the present, have their meaning, even while they are not contained in germ in the institution of the tradition itself. The painter takes up previous experiences or works of art that have taken on the value of dimensions, or levels, for him, and which thereby orient his work.

That is why his labour, which is obscure for him, is nevertheless guided and oriented. It is always only a question of advancing the line of the already opened furrow and of recapturing and generalizing an accent which has already appeared in the corner of a precious painting or in some instant of his experience, without the painter himself ever being able to say (since the distinction has no meaning) what comes from him and what comes from things, what his work adds to the previous ones, or what he has taken from others as opposed to what is his own.\textsuperscript{315}

Institution is a genesis of sense against the dual horizon of the past and the future: the life-world with its existing traditions, and the telos toward which current artistic activity is directed. New cultural formations change the sense of both past and future. Expression

\textsuperscript{313} IP, 48.  
\textsuperscript{314} IP, 41.  
\textsuperscript{315} ILVS, 95.
is both a beginning and a continuation.\textsuperscript{316} Each institution is “an attempt to surpass which preserves.”\textsuperscript{317}

Events have the power of instituting a teleology by laying out a field of possibilities that can be taken up at a later time. In keeping with this, Merleau-Ponty refers to the instituting event as \textit{advent}, the promise of events.\textsuperscript{318} In this way there is, as Scott Marratto expresses it, a “teleology emerging from events.” Cultural formations are teleological, in that they establish a goal towards which all subsequent endeavours will strive, such as anatomical verisimilitude or precise geometric measurement. Yet since expressions are always slightly different than what their creator intended, this is a teleology without a determinate telos. As we have seen, what is expressed in a work of art does not pre-exist its expression, but guides the activity as a “vague fever.” Through the expression of the artist, a new teleology is instituted, one that does not fully possess its own end, but intends it blindly, like a “gap, a need, or a tendency … an obsession or anticipation.”\textsuperscript{320} The teleology within cultural activity is “a teleology of the whole, without possession of the end.”\textsuperscript{321} This is because each new cultural accomplishment has the power to lay out a new field of possibilities and a new task to be accomplished. By the time the telos is achieved, it may no longer be “transcended in its acquisition,”\textsuperscript{322} for new cultural accomplishments made possible by past projections in turn project new possibilities. Ar-

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{316} ILVS, 105.
\bibitem{317} IP, 47.
\bibitem{318} ILVS, 105.
\bibitem{319} Marratto, \textit{The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity}, 195: “a teleology emerging from events—events, such as the gestures of our own bodies, that institute a direction, an order of meaning, the provisional unity of a project—but a teleology whose meaning includes the sense of a resistance to any final determination of a destination, normativity, or final cause.”
\bibitem{320} ILVS, 79.
\bibitem{321} IP, 42.
\bibitem{322} Landgrebe, 169.
\end{thebibliography}
tistic expression, as Merleau-Ponty explains,

> takes up an intention that precedes it (the originary *Stiftung* of geometry) and it creates an intention out of it which survives it and will go further (the actual *Stiftung* of a new sense) and by which there is forgetfulness of origins.\(^{323}\)

It is this living historicity that animates the artist’s work “when with a single gesture he links the tradition that he carries on and the tradition that he founds.”\(^{324}\) This historicity is constituted by the historical task of painting. That is, “by the *interest* which bears us toward that which is not us and by that life which the past, in a continuous exchange, brings to us and finds in us.”\(^{325}\) This historicity which lives in the painter “like his heartbeat”\(^{326}\) Merleau-Ponty calls the *historicity of life*.

Yet this living history is often supplanted by official pompous history within the museum.\(^{327}\) We have a tendency to oppose works of art to each other, as if they were competing claims to truth and not colleagues in the same historical task. This results in a kind of historicism in which the concerns and perspectives of one age are imposed upon others in an almost deliberate refusal of understanding. According to Merleau-Ponty, this approach to historicity is

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\(^{323}\) IP, 51.
\(^{324}\) ILVS, 100.
\(^{325}\) ILVS, 97.
\(^{326}\) ILVS, 99.
\(^{327}\) Merleau-Ponty’s objections to Malraux are often thinly-disguised objections to Hegel. Indeed, as he says “these fragmentary analyses are intended as a revision of Hegelianism” (IP, 79). For Merleau-Ponty history does not proceed by negation but by inadvertent continuation of the historical task established by previous institutions. There is no synthesis, no definite telos, as each institution establishes a new telos and new possibilities to be taken up by later artists. It is a “dialectic without synthesis” (VI, 94). Yet, unlike Husserl, from whom he borrows the concept of institution, Merleau-Ponty does not wish a return to the establishment of tradition. Rather, the truest way of resisting sedimentation is not to enshrine it in the museum and conduct extensive historical research, but to continue the project that inspired its makers by other means. Even if this means departing from their work itself.
ironic or even derisory, and made of misinterpretations, for each age struggles against the others as against aliens by imposing its concerns and perspectives upon them. This history is forgetfulness rather than memory; it is dismemberment, ignorance, externality.\textsuperscript{328}

While museum history claims to preserve the tradition, it does so only by forgetting the historical task that animated the painter. In this historicity, art history is conceived as a series of negations of one artistic movement by the next. Any similarity of aim or method is found only in death, when the old rivals find themselves reconciled, against their desire, in the “meditative necropolis” of the museum.\textsuperscript{329} Merleau-Ponty calls this history the \textit{historicity of death}. The diminished survival given to historical artifacts in museums is a “hypocritical form of forgetfulness” that masquerades as memory.\textsuperscript{330} Forgetting the historical task that guided the painter’s work, the museum retains only its outer shells, the “debris of an unknown celebration.”\textsuperscript{331}

This approach to the historicity of painting forgets that each work is a response to a field of significance laid out by a tradition of painterly gestures. Even a refusal or negation of tradition gains its significance from the tradition itself and is not a literal origin. When it attempts to negate tradition, painting “denies the past too deliberately to be able to truly free itself from it. It can only forget it while exploiting it”\textsuperscript{332}—that is, in the positive forgetfulness that comes from continuing a tradition while founding a new one. In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{328} ILVS, 97.
\item \textsuperscript{329} ILVS, 97.
\item \textsuperscript{330} ILVS, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{331} CD, 75.
\item \textsuperscript{332} ILVS, 116.
\end{itemize}
arguing for the obsolescence of past art, the present artist hastens her own obsolescence and makes painting itself seem like a series of unsuccessful efforts.333

As Merleau-Ponty remarks in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “history is neither a perpetual novelty, nor a perceptual repetition, but the unique movement which creates stable forms and breaks them up.”334 Institution is not a literal origin, a negation of tradition, nor its repetition, but something more on the order of *retention*, as every event, “with its froth of the past and its crest of the future,” sends reverberations into later events.335 Yet this is a double movement, for this wave ripples into the past as well. The past is changed by each new event. Just as every note in a melody changes the meaning of the previous notes, each new artwork changes the meaning of those of the past, without negating them.

While the meaning of a painting develops in relation to its cultural-historical life-world as a field of sense, the meaning of a work of art is not inaccessible to all but those who lived in the same cultural-historical milieu. As a stable cultural formation it is meaningful for other people at other times. The work of art signifies in excess of the historical tradition of which it forms a part. As Merleau-Ponty says, “the power or fecundity of works of art exceeds every positive causal or linear relation.”336 Furthermore, it signifies “in excess of the painter’s intended meaning” by laying out a field of sense for subse-

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333 In John Logan’s play *Red* there is a scene in which Mark Rothko returns from a Pop Art show screaming “They’re trying to kill me!!” several scenes after having gleefully recounted how he “stomped” Cubism “to death” in a necessary Oedipal assassination of his artistic forefathers. “The child must banish the father,” he says, “Respect him, but kill him” (pp.15, 32).


335 ILVS, 139.

336 EM, 139.
quent works. In addition, the art works of other cultures still have meaning for us, even if it is not their original meaning.

No matter how hard we try to make an inventory of what is or is not within a philosopher’s thought or an artist’s oeuvre, there is always an unthought, a sense that still calls for expression within the work, between the words, between the painted forms. Insofar as it inaugurates a field of sense, there is a “halo of sense” of unexplored possibilities that surrounds the work. Ideas have a history: they are instituted, they sediment and they can even die (as in the case of lost works of art, or dead languages). Yet by inaugurating a field of sense, their meaning extends beyond that of their historical time. The ideality of the work of art is not opposed to its historicity. In this way Merleau-Ponty “challenges the presumption that the artwork’s meaning is confined to its historic period, as well as the presumed stability of a given context.”

Because the meaning of a work of art is not confined to its historical time period, it can be subject to a reprise. It can be taken up by subsequent artists as a source of

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337 ILVS, 105.
338 ILVS, 105.
340 IP, 53.
341 Themes from the Lectures, 116: “ideality coincides with historicity.” See also Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, 7. We will return to this combination of ideality and historicity in our discussion of carnal ideality in Chapter Three.
342 Boetzkes, 690.
343 While in his translation of the Institution and Passivity Lectures, Lawlor variously translates reprise as “resumption,” “taking up” and even “repetition,” Whitmoyer notes that it also indicates “re-opening,” “reprisal,” and “deepening.” See IP, xxxv (Translators’ Note) and Whitmoyer, “Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Ontological Lateness,” 160, n.33. While “repetition” is somewhat misleading, as it implies the possibility of complete reactivation, which Merleau-Ponty denies, “re-opening” resonances nicely with the image of the level as a furrow, a generative divergence in the perceptual field, as well as with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of interpretation as somewhere “between fidelity and heresy.” (Whitmoyer, “Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Ontological Lateness,”157). See also Bergo, “Philosophy as Perspectiva Artificialis: Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Husserlian Constructivism” (the Afterword to Husserl at Limits of Phenomenology), 167: “There is also ‘reunderstanding’ (Nachverstehen) and counterstanding (Mitverstehen) of the ori-
new possibilities for their own work. It is because of this that Merleau-Ponty argues that we should visit museums more like artists, in search of new possibilities in the field of painting. “We learn to paint differently by visiting with the predecessors.” We betray the fecundity of works of art, if we are too precious with our cultural heritage, if rather than being inspired by works of art to think, to paint, or to write, we make them sit politely in their historical boxes and gather dust. We can be faithful to them only by taking up their historical task. This is the “noble form of memory.”

Yet this taking up of possibilities is not a literal repetition of the historical work of art. A Vermeer for us will never mean what it did to Vermeer, for “the meaning of the problem of painting” has changed since the time of Vermeer—and indeed as a result of Vermeer. This kind of reprise of the historical work of art “does not flatter itself to contain it all (in its entirety).” Yet neither is the reprise the negation of tradition in favour of the new, since the sense of past works of art still forms the horizon for the sense of present ones. This creative reprise, this positive forgetfulness, is neither literal reproduction nor inevitable distortion, but lies, as Whitmoyer says, somewhere “between fidelity and heresy.” As Merleau-Ponty says,

gins of geometry, and literature; these too are possibilities by which a tradition re-creates itself. The latter two are not, however, identical with reactivation.”

344 IP, 47.
345 “Philosopher and his Shadow,” in Signs, 160: “we can be faithful to and find [works] only by thinking again.”
346 ILVS, 96: “The world as soon as he has seen it, his first attempts at painting, and the whole past of painting all deliver up a tradition to the painter— that is, Husserl remarks, the power to forget origins and to give to the past not a survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but a new life, which is the noble form of memory.”
347 ILVS, 98.
348 IP, 59.
tradition is this double movement: being other in order to be the same, forgetting in order to conserve, producing in order to receive, looking ahead in order to receive the entire force of the past.\textsuperscript{350}

We are not condemned to historical relativism, nor are we irreparably cut off from the past, since each past institution has sense beyond that of its own historical time period and forms the field of sense \textit{for our own time}. Even if we do not understand past events in the same way as those who lived them, they are not totally unintelligible. This is why, as Merleau-Ponty says,

\begin{quote}
We do not even have the morose consolation of a vague relativism, since each stage of our knowledge is indeed a truth and will be preserved in the more comprehensive truth of the future.\textsuperscript{351}
\end{quote}

Whether we accept or reject tradition, it forms the situation to which we must respond. New expressive institutions are motivated by the trajectory of past sense, even when they turn back and reject it. As Merleau-Ponty says, “The sense we give to them later on has issued from them.”\textsuperscript{352} Like a melody infinitely transposed, in which there is a seamless transition from one phrase to the next, but in which the end bears little resemblance to the beginning, there is a continuity of sense, without it being the \textit{same} sense. If we find new meaning later within historical works of art, it is because it has transformed the field of possibility for its own understanding in such a way that we can understand its significance in a way unavailable to its participants.

This continuity of historical sense does not mean that the meaning of a work of art lies in the future anterior, in what it \textit{will have meant} to viewers yet unborn. The meaning

\textsuperscript{350} \textit{Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology}, 31.
\textsuperscript{351} ILVS, 79.
\textsuperscript{352} ILVS, 139.
of Cézanne’s interrogation of space must not wait patiently in germ until it is finally allowed to erupt in Picasso’s shattering of spatial conventions. As Merleau-Ponty says, “retrospection does not retrace the steps of a pre-established causality and finality.” Picasso’s painting is not the true telos, but the “particular case of a more general investigation.” Neither does the meaning of Cézanne’s painting lie in some remote past, hanging in the air over his rambles with Zola across the Provençal countryside, stuck like a bottle in the riverbed, or nestled into the fruit bowl in his little cottage with Marie-Hortense. Neither past nor future can make an exclusive claim to the sense of his work. The institution of a work intends an “open sense” that develops through proliferation in subsequent works, zigzagging between the past and the future. “What we mean is … the excess of what we live over what has already been said.”

The sense of art history is not at its end in the glorious achievement of the artistic telos, nor in its distant origin in the dark caves of Lascaux. Rather it is in a state of continual genesis as, through the circular movement between tradition and the new artistic possibilities opened up by expression, cultural formations sediment upon each other and create new historical idealities and new situations for the institution of sense.

II. The Origin of Perspective

(a) Lived Depth

While Renaissance artists were quite excited about their creative solution to the problem of spatial construction—one thinks of Paolo Uccello’s famous rejection his wife’s em-
braces in favour of long hours spent chasing the vanishing point in the merry company of “la prospettiva”—perspective in our time has become simply a “correct” way of expressing space. One symptom of this sedimentation is the regrettable tendency to regard children’s drawing as an abortive attempt to represent the world according to the laws of classical geometric perspective. This tendency is reflective of the more general tendency to regard perspective as the only true representation of space. Yet perspective is an historical accomplishment, an institution (Stiftung), a technique of ordering space developed by Renaissance architects, painters, and draughtsman to order make it amenable to architectural planning and illusionistic representation. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, “two-dimensional perspective is not a form of realism. It is a construction.”

This assumption of the truth of linear perspective has its roots in a mathematical conception of space that emerged in the Renaissance, most notably in the work of Galileo. Husserl, in the Crisis, describes one result of Galileo’s work as the “geometrization

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358 In The Poetics of Perspective James Elkins takes issue with the supposed univocity of linear perspective, arguing that Renaissance perspective was originally much more pluralistic than our usual conception of perspective would admit. Renaissance authors spoke of “perspectives” rather than perspective, and many scenes were constructed with multiple vanishing points. While Elkins includes Merleau-Ponty within this tendency to over-simplify perspective, Merleau-Ponty’s position is more consistent with Elkins’ position than it may appear. Merleau-Ponty has no quarrel with perspective as a practice, as a historical accomplishment (Stiftung). What he objects to is raising perspective to a level of objectivity that would admit of no other expression of depth. In fact, the plurality of perspectives within ancient and early Renaissance painting is compatible with the multiplicity of viewing points in the paintings of Cézanne which present varying aspects of objects.

359 PW, 149.
of nature.” Yet as Merleau-Ponty argues, “nature is not in itself geometrical,” for geometry is itself the result of an idealization of certain structures of the life-world.

This geometric conception of space is especially prevalent in the work of Descartes, Merleau-Ponty’s consistent foil in his quest to overcome ontological dualism. There are at least two different treatments of space in Descartes. The first is of the realm of res extensa, the grid-like plenum occupied by extended things and traversed by trajectories of motion represented by Cartesian physics; the other is the flat space available to res cogitans, on which projective geometry can be used to replicate the “illusion” of perceptual experience by means of linear perspective. Res extensa is essentially a Euclidean space,

A space without transcendence, positive, a network of straight lines, parallel among themselves or perpendicular according to the three dimensions, which sustains all possible situations—Underlying appropriateness of this idea of space (and of velocity, movement, time) with the classical ontology of the Ens realissimum, of the infinite entity. Cartesian space as res extensa is a uniform grid, universally accessible to reason through the algebraic geometry. In this “space without hiding places,” thought ranges over objects which can be precisely located on a grid. This is the homogenous continuum, measurable, and infinite which, as Panofsky argues, is the characteristic conception of space in the modern period.

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360 PP, 65.
361 VI, 210.
362 EM, 134.
363 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 49-58. Space in the modern period becomes a “continuous quantity, consisting of three physical dimensions, existing by nature before all bodies and beyond all bodies, indifferently receiving everything.” (Panofsky, 66). It is interesting to note that the very problem of cognizing the infinite that culminates in the Kantian conception of the sublime in the Third Critique finds its staging ground in the debates in Descartes’ time over space as
Yet, as Merleau-Ponty objects, before I can conceive of space as an absolute continuum, I must “abandon [my] point of view on the world, and think [myself] into a sort of ubiquity.” This kind of thinking is what Merleau-Ponty calls la pensé du survol. This phrase is sometimes translated as “high-altitude thinking,” which conveys the sense of flying overhead, but it could also be described as the “survey view,” which would convey the sense of surveillance, dominance and mastery appropriate to operational thought. In this conception of space the “sovereign gaze” ranges over a space that is in front of it, not around it.

The transition from Cartesian space to the subjective conception of the perspective view occurs within Descartes’ Optics. In this work, Descartes attempts to give a mechanistic conception of perception according to geometric optics. Descartes explains vision using the analogy of a tennis ball to demonstrate the geometrical trajectory of light as it reflects or refracts on contact with extended bodies, according to his laws of motion. On contact with the eye, light is bent by the lens and travels unimpeded to the retina. Descartes demonstrates this by using the eye of an ox and replacing the retina with a

infinite or indefinite physical extension. The theological resonances of the concept of the infinite are felt especially strongly at this time in the visceral resistance to the conception of space as infinite. For Descartes, for example, “God is infinite. The world is only indefinite.” (Koyrè, From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe, 106.)

364 PP, 298.
365 This is Alphonso Lingis’ translation in the Visible and the Invisible, following Benita Eisler’s translation of Sartre’s Situations. See VI, 13, n.7.
366 VI, 113. If this Merleau-Pontian phrase resonates especially strongly with Foucault’s account of the sovereign gaze in the essay on Las Meninas in The Order of Things and the discussion of panoptic surveillance in Discipline and Punish, it is not accidental. See Catherine M. Soutsloff’s essays “Michel Foucault and the Point of Painting” and “Foucault on Painting” and for a fascinating account of Foucault’s engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic essays in the formation of his own thought on visuality.
white sheet—the original tabula rasa—and showing how the image remains intact. The eye is a camera obscura; the retina is a screen.

The problem comes when the trajectory of light must pass through the optic nerve. Descartes incorrectly assumes that Aristotelian intentional species are “little images flitting through the air” which must be transmitted from the nerves to the brain by mechanistic and not formal causality. Since the optic nerve is opaque, it cannot transmit light directly from the object to the brain, but only in the mediated form of nerve impulses. The resemblance between the object and its perspective-view is thereby severed. The perspective view becomes a “mental image,” a representation which is linked to the object by reference or denotation alone. Yet since we do have perceptions, the question becomes, how can we know that they are veridical?

The optic nerve transmits motions to the brain, impulses, and while these impulses correspond to the objects that cause them, they do not resemble them. As in the case of a blind man using a stick to sense the objects around him, the resistance or movement of the bodies touched by the stick is nothing like the ideas he forms of them. Similarly, Descartes says, signs and words can “stimulate the mind to conceive” of their objects without resembling them. In engravings, “a little ink placed here and there” stands for forests, towns, people, battles and storms. While the objects depicted in engravings may be

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367 Descartes, “Optics.” Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1, 166.
369 Descartes, “Optics.” Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1, 165: “For since their conception of the images is confined to the requirement that they resemble the objects they represent, the philosophers cannot possibly show us how the images can be formed by the objects, or how they can be received by the external sense organs and transmitted by the nerves to the brain.” See also Mitscherling, Aesthetic Genesis, pp. 33-36 for a discussion of the misinterpretation of formal causality in Descartes’ time.
thought to resemble their real counterparts in shape at least, even here there is a lack of resemblance. Perspective drawings achieve their illusion through distortion, as when an ellipse stands in for a circle.

Descartes approaches perspective in its skeptical relativist guise alone, as a subject-relative deformation of the universal geometry, which is the true in-itself. This is the sense in which plane projection “refers us back … to our own vantage point.” This is the sense in which I can talk about “my perspective” or “your perspective.” Subjects are imagined as walking around the world projecting perspective pyramids in front of their eyes in the manner of Abraham Bosse’s famous engraving, *Les Perspecteurs* (Fig. 8).

The cogito, Descartes’ “Archimedean point” outside the world, functions as the apex of the perspective pyramid. It is the point at which the viewer stands outside the space of the picture plane. Space is in front of, not around the subject. The cogito is a kind of “cyclopean eye,” a point beyond the pineal gland at which the flat retinal images are synthesized. The correlative unity is the vanishing point itself, within the painting or the object. This unity is that sought by the teleology of consciousness, where all orthogonals meet.

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372 EM, 135.
374 VI, 141. We recall here that the pineal gland was identified by Descartes as the seat of the soul primarily because it was the only part of the brain which was not doubled, and therefore could enact the primary synthesis required for cognition. “Apart from this gland … all the other parts of our brain are double.” (Descartes. "The Passions of the Soul," *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, 340)
375 This dual pyramid construction of perspective is famously diagrammatized by Lacan in “The Gaze as Objet Petit a.” in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 106.
Engravings are the result of this subjective experience of the perspective-view. Consequently, they are subject to the same illusions as perceptual experience. Descartes predictably objects that engravings do not resemble what they depict. Since they do not resemble, they must achieve their effect through a denotative relationship like that of a sign to its referent. Like words, which also do not resemble their objects, engravings “stimulate the mind to conceive” of their objects. It is precisely this tenuous relationship between the perspective view and its referent that forces Descartes, after writing the Géométry and the Dioptrics, to take up the skeptical problems of the Discourse on Method.
and the *Meditations*. If mental images, like perspective views, are mere signs, which do not resemble their objects, how can I know the world outside my mind?

Yet on what grounds does Descartes say that engravings do *not* resemble their objects? To which objects are they being compared? It is here that Descartes’ implicit metaphysical assumptions are revealed, as well as the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “every theory of painting is a metaphysics”.376 Engravings do not resemble the true nature of reality, which for Descartes is not the perceived thing (deplorably susceptible as it is to perceptual illusions), but rather the sole aspect of the thing accessible to mathematical cognition—its extended geometric shape. The cup, known to geometry to be a cylinder with a circular top, appears in the painting to have an elliptical top, a distortion necessary for the painting to achieve its illusion. This illusion is possible because, while paintings may not resemble the true geometric nature of things, they do resemble other appearances. Because of this, like appearances, they are also sources of error. Descartes’ doubt is therefore “a clandestine positivism,”377 for it conceals his metaphysical commitment to the reality of geometric space beyond the perceiver.

Yet for Merleau-Ponty, the possibility of perceptual illusion does not destroy the truth value of perception. As he says, “in so far as we talk about illusion, it is because we have identified illusions, and done so solely in the light of some perception which at the same time gave assurance of its own truth.”378 If I see a tower in the distance and I think it is round, I only know this to be an error once I have moved closer and seen that it is square. Our idea of truth is based on a more complete perception, a view from everywhere which would correct all the omissions of our limited viewpoint. Our perception of

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376 EM, 132.
377 VI, 120.
378 PP, xviii.
the world is “that upon which our idea of truth is forever based. We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive.”³⁷⁹

This does not mean that there cannot be error; perceptions are often partial and beliefs based on them can be incorrect. Yet this does not mean that we are forever condemned to error, or separated from the truth as if from a long-lost land by an un-crossable barrier. Knowledge is provisional and open to constant revision and self-correction. While I might start with an opinion which is partial and misguided, it is only through this first attempt that I can correct it and achieve knowledge.³⁸⁰ Knowledge for Merleau-Ponty is not absolute certainty and intellectual adequation, coincidence with a transparent object seen from everywhere, but a partial view constantly being revised. That is, “perspectivism” and knowledge are not mutually exclusive, since we are not forever condemned to one perspective, but may alter it through movement, learning, and conversation with others.

In Panofsky’s treatment, perspective is not subjective. Rather, its function as “a translation of psychophysical space into mathematical space” is “an objectification of the subjective.”³⁸¹ Like the empiricist’s impression, the perspective view is based on first-person experience. Yet the use of universal mathematical principles allows it to satisfy the rationalist’s desire for objectivity. Perspective for Panofsky is therefore analogous to Kant’s “Critical Philosophy,” possessing the same “subjective universality” constitutive

³⁷⁹ PP, xviii.
³⁸⁰ As for Husserl, for Merleau-Ponty also the Urdoxa of the life-world serves as ground for the development of knowledge.
³⁸¹ Panofsky, 66.
of the Kantian reconciliation between objectivity and subjectivity—namely, the philosophy of transcendental idealism.

While multiple subjects may situate themselves at the apex of the perspective cone, the distribution of objects in space laid out before them follows the same laws, for the Understanding unifies the manifold in the same ways. The perspective view on this account synthesizes the manifold from one (transcendental) perspective. Merleau-Ponty, following Panofsky, describes perspective as “the invention of a world dominated and possessed through and through by an instantaneous synthesis.”

Husserl also makes use of the concept of the “perspective view” as the subject-relative profile of the object offered to vision at one moment. On Husserl’s account the perspective view is not the synthesis, but the multiplicity of profiles offered up by the thing to the body in motion. Husserl’s concept of Sinngebung is in part an attempt to overcome the perspectivism of all perceptual experience. A unifying activity of consciousness is required so that the object that offers up so many profiles to vision can be encountered as a unitary whole. The problem of stable objects is also the problem of depth. As in the account given by Descartes, the perception offered to the ego subject is a flat retinal image. Any depth between this mental image and the object must be inferred once Cartesian doubt has been dispelled in favour of certain knowledge.

Yet Merleau-Ponty objects that static profiles of objects are not found in ordinary perception. Rather than a flat “retinal image” of one profile of the thing, we intend the whole thing. As a thing in our motor field, in perception we are directed toward things.

It is a remarkable fact that the uneducated have no inkling of perspective and that it took a long time and much reflection for men to become aware of a

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382 ILVS, 87.
perspectival deformation of objects. Thus, there is no deciphering, no mediate inference, from the sign to the signified, because the alleged signs are not given to me separately.\textsuperscript{383}

Perspective is not the “truest” expression of lived spatial experience, but rather an abstract product of reflection. In reflection we can separate one instant of time from my general movement toward my intentional object and thereby achieve the “perspective view.” However, in ordinary perception what we perceive are things and not profiles. The necessity for the synthesis of profiles is obviated, as is the fraught connection between the sign (the perceived oval) and the object it signifies (the geometric in-itself) which so troubled Descartes.

In perception, objects do not have any “apparent size.” In order to arrive at the apparent size, I must abstract an individual thing from the whole and use it as a standard of measurement. In lived depth, things close to me seem to shimmer, jutting out aggressively, not precisely here or there. I must close one eye in order to achieve the perspectival synthesis. My pencil, held in front of the model’s head, appears to hover half a foot to her right if I close the left eye, but becomes fixed in place over her head when I close the right.\textsuperscript{384} Only then can I use my pencil to measure the proportion of the leg in relation to the head. The creation of apparent size is the purpose of the curious device in Dürer ‘s woodcut (Fig. 9) that interposes a grid between the artist and the reclining woman so that the grid can be replicated on the paper and the “apparent sizes” of the woman’s leg close to the artist, and her head further away, can be transferred onto paper.

\textsuperscript{383} The Primacy of Perception, 15.
\textsuperscript{384} Merleau-Ponty mentions this familiar practice in The World of Perception, commenting that in so doing the painter alters the detail that is measured. See WP, 53.
While I am drawing the woman’s leg, the rest of her body and the room behind her are an out-of-focus background to her figure. Yet in normal perception my eyes dart around from leg to face to window as I palpate the whole. Things “[compete] for my glance.”

To achieve the apparent size I must “arbitrate the conflict” between the things close at hand that jut out aggressively and the things in the background that have not yet resigned themselves to being background and still jockey for position in my motor field. I must make them “co-possible on the same plane.”

Perspectival construction requires a high degree of artificiality. Dürer’s artist’s eye is kept at a fixed position at the end of a long vertical stylus, in order to keep it stationary at the apex of the perspectival pyramid. This helps the artist to avoid shifting his vantage point involuntarily and destroying the unified perspective image.

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385 What I look at is in focus, while the background is out of focus. Yet in order to draw something I must look at it. In many Northern Renaissance paintings, a curious effect is produced in which each feature of the painting is treated as a whole, fully rendered in scintillating detail even when it occupies a peripheral position in the composition. By contrast, in Italian Renaissance painting, such details are often subordinated to the unity of the whole spatial composition, veiled by the haze of atmospheric perspective or merely simplified as they recede in depth. Craig Harbison refers to this feature of Northern Renaissance art as “fragmentary realism.” (Harbison, *The Mirror of the Artist: Northern Renaissance Art in its Historical Context* pp. 38-42.)

386 ILVS, 87.

387 ILVS, 86.
As Merleau-Ponty says:

The classical perspective is an optional interpretation of spontaneous vision, not because the perceived world contradicts the laws of classical perspective and imposes others, but rather because it does not require any particular one, and is not of the order of laws.\textsuperscript{388}

Perspective allows space to unfold in a controlled manner. My eye slides easily over the landscape towards the horizon, spanning the regular intervals between details, which no longer jockey for position, but politely decrease in size as they approach the horizon. Yet while this controls the way in which details unfold, it also “kills their trembling life.”\textsuperscript{389} Things in a perspective drawing do not call to me to come closer and get a closer look, or shimmer between here and there when they are too close to my eyes. Perspectival space is no longer a part of my motor field. Perspectival space is a uniform, internally consistent, and universally available space which does not involve my body.

For the body, space is not uniform but oriented according to my motor intentionality.\textsuperscript{390} Things I move toward are either near or far, in front or behind, above or below me. Much of my movement is either centripetal (bringing things closer to me) or centrifugal (pushing them further away). This is why in lived experience depth is “the first dimension.”\textsuperscript{391} There is a primary divergence between myself and things: if we coincided, occupying the same space, I could not see them, or be directed toward them in any way. Yet at the same time, I am part of the same space as the things I encounter: I am within

\textsuperscript{388} ILVS, 86.
\textsuperscript{389} WP, 53.
\textsuperscript{390} PP, 115: “The word ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks.”
\textsuperscript{391} EM, 140.
space, not in front of it. To see is to see from some point in space. As Merleau-Ponty says, lived depth “announces a certain indissoluble link between things and myself.” Space is not a container, but the means of connection between things.

The problem of unifying profiles is really an attempt to account for the stability of the object across time. As I move around the object and see different sides of it, how do I know that it is the other side of the same object, and not some miracle of occasionalism brought into existence at that precise moment for my reassurance or bafflement? The object remains while I move. Husserl, like Kant before him, offers synthesis as a solution to this problem. I must construct in thought a stable substratum to ground the shifting appearances. Yet Merleau-Ponty argues that in our primordial experience of time, successive moments are not bound together by an identifying synthesis, which would fix them at a point in time and collapse their temporality. While reflection aims at unity as the tel-eology of consciousness with respect to time, unity merely “destroys the phenomenon of time.” Time is not assembled by adding present moments together. Rather, moments “issue one from the other, and each of these projections is merely one aspect of the total bursting forth or dehiscence” of time itself. Here again Husserl’s genetic account is taken up by Merleau-Ponty. The present moment transcends itself towards the past and

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392 PP, 298.
393 PP, 284.
394 PP, 482: “It is indeed the dream of philosophers to be able to conceive an ‘eternity of life, lying beyond permanence and change, in which time’s productivity is pre-eminently contained, and yet a thetic consciousness of time which stands above it and embraces it merely destroys the phenomenon of time.”
395 PP, 487.
the future through retention and protention.\textsuperscript{396} Its \textit{sens} is its relation to this double horizon.

Reflection separates the flowing movement into separate instances, like the successive photographs of Muybridge’s horses, and then wonders how it will ever be able to bridge the gulf between them, to create movement out of rest, something out of nothing. Yet just as Zeno’s paradoxes are “overcome by the act of movement,”\textsuperscript{397} the profiles of the thing isolated by reflection are subtended by the movement of my own body. As Merleau-Ponty says,

The intentionality that ties together the stages of my exploration, the aspects of the thing, and the two series to each other is neither the mental subject’s connecting activity nor the ideal connections of the object. It is the transition that as carnal subject I effect from one phase of movement to another, a transition which as a matter of principle is always possible for me because I am that animal or perceptions and movements called a body.\textsuperscript{398}

Time is not something secondary and derived, but the \textit{sense} of life itself. Merleau-Ponty quotes Paul Claudel at the beginning of the Temporality chapter of \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}:

Time is the sense of life (sense: as one says of the direction of a course of water, the sense of a phrase, the sense of a fabric, the sense of the sense of smell).\textsuperscript{399}

\textsuperscript{396} PP, 488: “the present is not shut up within itself, but transcends itself towards a future and a past.”
\textsuperscript{397} ILVS, 76.
\textsuperscript{399} “Le temps est le sens de la vie (sens: comme on dit le sens d’un cours d’eau, le sens d’une phrase, le sens d’une étoffe, le sens de l’odorat).” Claudel, \textit{Art Poétique} (quoted by Merleau-Ponty, PP, 476). Translation by Whitmoyer, “Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Ontological Late-ness,” 161.
Temporality is constitutive of our being as directed, intentional creatures. As Merleau-Ponty says, we are “the upsurge of time.”\textsuperscript{400} While reflection allows us to become aware of our temporal being, we must not forget that “our reflection on the flux is actually inserted into the flux.”\textsuperscript{401} In isolating one instant from the flux for analysis, reflection, like the photograph, lies, “for in reality time never stops.”\textsuperscript{402}

While perspective might seem to provide a synthesis of the manifold from one point in space, even perspectival arrangements of space do not fully succeed in synthesizing this multiplicity. As Merleau-Ponty observes, the hand of the captain in Rembrandt’s \textit{Nightwatch} (Fig. 10) is seen from two perspectives at once: mine and that of the light which casts its profile across his chest. At their intersection, a hand springs out.

The spatiality of the captain lies at the intersection of the two perspectives which are incompossible and yet together.\textsuperscript{403}

Yet we do not synthesize this divergence completely, as the light reveals another profile of the thing. Rather than requiring the subsumption of multiple perspectives, depth is enhanced by their proliferation. As Merleau-Ponty says, “we make our way into multiplicity, but ... we do not synthesize it.”\textsuperscript{404}

\textsuperscript{400} PP, 497.
\textsuperscript{401} PP, 495. See also, PP, xvi: “The need to proceed by way of essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but, on the contrary, that our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity.”
\textsuperscript{402} EM, 145. Quote attributed to Rodin.
\textsuperscript{403} EM,128.
\textsuperscript{404} PP, 497.
To stay true to the movement that subtends my experience of space, Cézanne juxtaposes incompossibles, showing the jug, the apple, the tabletop from different perspectives all at once (Fig. 11). In Cézanne’s painting, the edges of things “flay our glance” and disrupt its attempt at unity by presenting simultaneously incompossible aspects of the thing. (Fig. 12). In Cézanne, profiles are not unified through synthesis by a constituting consciousness. Rather they are compossible, as Rodin’s sculpture sometimes shows movement by contorting the figure so that it occupies several positions it could not occupy at once.\footnote{“The Philosopher and his Shadow,” 181: “things … flay our glance with their edges.”} \footnote{EM, 145.}
Fig. 11 Paul Cézanne, *Kitchen Table (Still Life with Basket)*, 1888-90.

Fig. 12 Erle Loran, *Diagram of the Composition of Cézanne’s ‘Kitchen Table’* (From Erle Loran, *Cézanne’s Composition*, p.77)
(b) “Every Theory of Painting is a Metaphysics”

Every theory of painting is a metaphysics in that every such theory articulates a relationship between myself as perceiver and the beings which display themselves. Are perceived beings illusions, like Descartes’ elliptical cup? Or are they our access to the real? Is the face of the other a mask concealing an unknowable and nebulous in-itself? Or can a portrait express his style of being? Is reality geometrical? Or can the essence of a thing be equally expressed in colour? After rejecting Descartes’ analysis of line engravings, Merleau-Ponty comments that “a closer study of painting would lead to a different philosophy”.407 If every theory of painting is a metaphysics, the metaphysics that emerges from Merleau-Ponty’s theory of painting will be a “concrete metaphysics”408 in Bachelard’s sense, whose emblems will be our primordial experience of space and things, and not a reality beyond or behind appearances.

Perception is a form of transcendence, allowing me to reach things which are other to myself. Through perception “we touch the sun and the stars.”409 And yet this transcendence is only possible because of a certain immanence. I could not see if I were truly ubiquitous, for vision is possible only for a situated being. Seeing is always seeing from some position in space. Not only do we not constitute the spatial world from a point outside of it, but if we were not a part of it, we could not see at all. As Merleau-Ponty explains, vision must be “inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us;”

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407 EM, 132.
408 Bachelard, Poetics of Space, 7.
409 EM, 146.
To see, we must be part of the world. My hand touching the things descends into their midst and is touched by them in such a way that “the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.”\textsuperscript{411} The things that reveal themselves in perception are not absolutely other, but of the same stuff as my body.\textsuperscript{412}

III. Reversibility: Klee and the Trees

To be inscribed as seers in the visible means that we can also be seen. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility is developed in implicit response to the Sartrean analysis of the gaze.\textsuperscript{413} Bent over and peering through a keyhole, I see without being seen. The spectacle inside is spread out before my pre-reflective gaze as something to be looked at. I am unaware of and unconcerned with my own appearance. Suddenly I hear footsteps in the hallway behind me, and I become aware of how I look to others, of how suspicious I seem, bent down to the keyhole, peering inside. I feel ashamed. Where before I was absorbed in the spectacle, now I am directed towards myself in reflection. Where before I was my intentions, I am now reduced to my acts under the gaze of the other. The other sees me merely as an object in his field of view, like one of the automata outside Descartes’ window, seen only from the outside, constituted from the apex of his perspective cone. In order to regain my subjectivity and wrest it back from the other, I must \textit{look back}

\textsuperscript{410} VI, 134.
\textsuperscript{411} VI, 134.
\textsuperscript{412} EM, 125: “The world is made of the same stuff as the body” & VI, 248: “my body is made of the same flesh as the world.”
\textsuperscript{413} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 347.
and subject him to my objectifying gaze as, in a kind of optical struggle for recognition, we each demand recognition of our subjectivity.

Yet Merleau-Ponty objects that the other is not pre-reflectively an object for me. As he gestures angrily to me to stop looking through his keyhole, I do not have to interpret his gestures, or look behind them for their sense. The subjectivity of the other, like the sense of his gestures, is not behind his angry gestures, but in them.\textsuperscript{414} Myself and the other are together in a primordial intercorporeity.\textsuperscript{415} Standing in front of a landscape with the other, his experience of it is not unknowable for me. When he points something out that I missed, I can come to see his green in my green, as when I listen to him speak, his words guide my thought along unknown paths.\textsuperscript{416} We are not each in a private world of our own. Rather our “landscapes interweave.”\textsuperscript{417} I am not only active in relation to the other, constituting him as he appears to me. Rather, I am active/passive, as is he.

As a speaking and active subject I encroach upon the other who is listening, as the understanding and passive subject I allow the other to encroach upon me … I experience activity each time as the other side of passivity.\textsuperscript{418}

As we converse, we oscillate between speaking and listening, active and passive. I can be guided by the words and gestures of the other to come to see the world differently.

\textsuperscript{414} “Film and the New Psychology,” in \textit{Sense and Non-Sense}, p.52: “We must reject that prejudice which makes ‘inner realities’ out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them.”
\textsuperscript{415} VI, 141.
\textsuperscript{416} In the words of the other I am “surprised to find the track of an alien thought.” (PP, 361)
\textsuperscript{417} VI, 142.
\textsuperscript{418} \textit{Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology}, 8.
The crucial ambiguity of the body is that it is both sensing and sensible. My hand touching the things can also *be touched*; it is both the agent of my motor intentionality and an intentional object. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

When I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too ... the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched.’

For Merleau-Ponty, this reveals that the body is both subject and object, active and passive, a “sensible sentient.” Yet what results is not merely a combination of idealist activity and empirical passivity, subject and object. The observation that the hand cannot be simultaneously in a relation of touching and touched to the other hand leads to a further observation on the peculiar nature of reflection itself.

In pre-reflective experience, I am directed towards the world. Yet it is not spread out transparently in front of me, for I always see from some point in space. In primordial perception I cannot see myself seeing. I am blind at the very point where the fibres that permit vision spread out into the retina. “My visual body includes a large gap at the level of the head,” and of my face all I can see is the tip of my nose and the boundaries of my eye sockets. Yet if I look in the mirror, hoping to get a more complete view of myself, something strange happens. Rather than a restoration of the missing pieces of myself into a primordial wholeness, what results is a sort of alienation.

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419 PP, 106. See also Husserl, *Ideas II*, p. 152. “The hand that is touching, which for its part again appears as a thing, likewise, has its touch-sensations at the place on its corporeal surface where it touches (or is touched by the other).”
420 VI, 137.
421 VI, 248.
I am no longer what I felt myself, immediately, to be; I am that image of myself that is offered by the mirror.\footnote{423}{“The Child’s Relations with Others,” in \textit{The Primacy of Perception}, 136. The influence of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage on Merleau-Ponty’s account of reversibility is well known; Merleau-Ponty cites Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” essay approvingly within the text. However, where for Merleau-Ponty the reflected self is the \textit{superego}, for Lacan it is the \textit{ego}. (Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I Function” in \textit{Écrits}, 75-81.) As Hugh Silverman notes, Merleau-Ponty reverses the operation of the mirror stage. Instead of constituting the subject as subject, the mirror image renders him other to himself. (Hugh Silverman’s “Cézanne’s Mirror Stage” in \textit{The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader}, 273.) Merleau-Ponty argues that the mirror prepares me for the gaze of the other, for whom I am \textit{seen}. Lacan also acknowledges the influence of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility in “The Gaze as Objet Petit a.” in \textit{Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis}, 67-119. See especially his doubled perspective pyramid diagram on page 106.}

When I look in the mirror or touch myself touching, my body “accomplishes ‘a sort of reflection.’”\footnote{424}{Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” in \textit{Signs}, 166.}

I become my own intentional object. Yet in the reflective attitude, the very attitude in which we expect, as good Cartesians, to find an atomic self, I become fragmented into seeing self and seen self, thinking self and thought-about self, intending and intended. My self as intentional object and my self as reflecting subject do not coincide. I do not shrink back to the point of identity represented by the cogito. Where in pre-reflective life I felt myself to inhabit the centre of the perceived world spread around me, in reflection I am pushed from the centre of the world and made \textit{other} to myself. As Merleau-Ponty observes, “I discover by reflection not only my presence to myself, but also the possibility of an ‘outside spectator’.”\footnote{425}{PP, xiii.}

My body and the world are like “two spheres, concentric when I live naively, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentred with respect to the other.”\footnote{426}{VI, 138: “My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. Or rather … two spheres, concentric when I live naively, as as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentred with respect to the other….”}
Similarly, when, with my left hand, I try to catch my right hand touching, it flips over into the order of the touched, when I try to see the gaze of the other I cannot. “The coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization.” My two hands never coincide, as I never coincide with the other, or catch his gaze. This proximity, yet non-identity, Merleau-Ponty calls écart.

As a sensible-sentient, my body can accomplish this bodily reflection and flip over into its other mode at any time, and can be inspired to do so by the most unexpected experiences. Merleau-Ponty recounts the reflection of Paul Klee who says,

> In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me…. I was there, listening…. I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it…. I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.

Sometimes the roles between the seer and the seen spontaneously switch. Absorbed in the visible, directed by the unfolding sense of the spectacle, attuned to the carnal expressivity of things, it can begin to seem as though it is the trees that see, and not the painter. As Cézanne says, “the landscape thinks itself in me … and I am its consciousness.” Where the painter entered the forest actively to engage with the world and express himself, his “activity is equally passivity,” as the carnal essences begin to direct his vision according to their style.

As Dillon observes, if the trees and I can literally exchange places, then the element

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427 VI, 147.
428 Écart could be translated as “spread,” “divergence,” “deviation,” “difference” or, as we will see, fold.
429 EM, 129.
430 CD, 67.
431 VI, 139: “The vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity.”
of difference (écart) in reversibility is negated.\textsuperscript{432} Although I can place myself in a way that allows me to see the view seen from the trees, and I can imagine what it would be like to be a tree, I cannot actually see things as the trees see them. Nonetheless, the presence of the trees has the ability to make me aware of myself as an other, that I am not only a power of vision, but also a visible.

This reversibility, which characterizes being, is also constitutive of the painter’s craft. Interrogating the visible and attuning oneself to its carnal expressivity, letting oneself by guided by the vectors of its latent sense to bring another sense into being, artists oscillate between active and passive. It is therefore not surprising that, as Merleau-Ponty observes, artists often draw themselves in the act of drawing. Self-portraits add “to what [the painter] could see of things at the moment, what things could see of them, as if to attest to there being a total or absolute vision, leaving nothing outside, including themselves.”\textsuperscript{433} The painter as situated often strains to complete this total vision, looking out of the corner of his eye, trying to catch himself as seen by others. In his self-portrait engraving (\textbf{Fig. 13}), Matisse’s eyes are rendered in detail, firmly fixed in the mirror, while his hands at work are faint and blurred. When hands draw themselves, the movement necessary to the hand as artist renders the hand as model rather uncooperative indeed.

\textsuperscript{432} Dillon, “Merleau-Ponty and the Reversibility Thesis,” 373. 
\textsuperscript{433} EM, 130.
MIRRORS

Mirrors enact the peculiar reflexivity of the sensible and have the power to instigate a reversal from seer to seen. As Merleau-Ponty notes, in certain Dutch paintings, “an interior in which no one is present is ‘digested’ by the ‘round eye of the mirror’.”\textsuperscript{434} In his \textit{Arnolfini Portrait} (1434) (Fig. 14), Van Eyck inscribes his name above the mirror as if to attest to the reflexivity of the visible, placing himself squarely within the painting.\textsuperscript{435} The mirror converts the self into an other and the other into the self, as if the painter himself were seen by its “pre-human eye.”\textsuperscript{436}

\textsuperscript{434} EM, 129.
\textsuperscript{435} The inscription above the mirror reads: “Johannes Van Eyck fuit hir 1434” [Johannes van Eyck was here 1434]. Harbison, \textit{The Mirror of the Artist}, 13.
\textsuperscript{436} EM, 130: “Mirrors are instruments of a universal magic that converts things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another and another into myself.”
Since the things guide my vision according to their latent sense, I have the impression that they already know what they will teach me. Here we recall Merleau-Ponty’s statement that light illuminating a stage set “anticipates our vision,” as if it already sees the set before the audience arrives.\textsuperscript{437} Since I am situated in space and am not ubiquitous, I have the sense that there are other points of view from which I would also be visible.

\textsuperscript{437} PP, 361: “If I imagine a theatre with no audience in which the curtain rises upon illuminated scenery, I have the impression that the spectacle is in itself visible or ready to be seen, and that the light which probes the back and foreground, accentuating the shadows and permeating the scene through and through, in a way anticipates our vision. Conversely our own vision merely takes up on its own account and carries through the encompassing of the scene by those paths traced out for it by the lighting, just as, when we hear a sentence, we are surprised to discover the track of an alien thought. We perceive in conformity with the light, as we think in conformity with other people in verbal communication.”
Myself and the things are part of the same fabric of visibility, which, turning back on itself, gives rise to a vision which is not entirely mine or that of the world.\textsuperscript{438}

Vision presents this paradox: I am of the same stuff as the other and the world and I am not identical to myself (écart). The relationship of the sensing to the sensible is one of “identity without superposition … difference without contradiction.”\textsuperscript{439} If I coincided absolutely with the world, with the other, and with the thing, I could not see them. Yet if we did not share some kinship, if we were not part of the same world, if absolute difference yawned between us, we also could not see each other. Contra Sartre’s lakes and holes in being, Merleau-Ponty therefore speaks of a “fold” in being. Being folds back on itself without collapsing into itself. Being \textit{senses} itself. It is through this reflexivity in the heart of being that seer and seen, active and passive, self and other come into being.

IV. Flesh as Intentional Being and the Ontology of Sense

In \textit{the Visible & the Invisible}, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a \textit{latent intentionality} through which “intentionality ceases to be a property of consciousness, of its ‘attitudes’ and of its acts, to become intentional life.”\textsuperscript{440} This latent intentionality is a development of Merleau-Ponty’s \textit{operative intentionality} from the \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}—a form of intentionality that precedes predicative judgments and conscious acts, a basic directed-

\textsuperscript{438} VI, 139: “There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself surrounded by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact.”

\textsuperscript{439} VI, 135.

\textsuperscript{440} VI, 173. See PP, 498: “We found beneath the intentionality of acts, or thetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former’s possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgement, a ‘Logos of the aesthetic world’, an ‘art hidden in the depths of the human soul’, one which, like any art, is known only in its results.” See also “the Philosopher and his Shadow,” 165: “an operating or latent intentionality like that which animates time, more ancient than the intentionality of human acts.”
ness of our being towards what it is not.\textsuperscript{441} For Merleau-Ponty this directedness of being is constitutive of its sense. As he writes:

In all uses of the word sens, we find the same fundamental notion of a being orientated or polarized in the direction of what he is not, and thus we are always brought back to a conception of the subject as ek-stase, and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world. The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world.\textsuperscript{442}

Being, whether conscious or not, is directed towards what it is not. It exhibits tendencies (what Merleau-Ponty would call style). This notion of intentionality is consistent with what Jeff Mitscherling has proposed as a “new Copernican hypothesis for phenomenology.” Not only is all consciousness intentional, rather “intentionality (i.e. directionality) gives rise to consciousness.”\textsuperscript{443}

Intentionality is not only a pre-reflective directedness in the “subject-pole,” but a certain directedness in the “object-pole” as well.\textsuperscript{444} As early as Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty observes that perception involves taking up an extraneous intention while simultaneously relating ourselves intentionally to things.

Every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things.\textsuperscript{445}

\textsuperscript{441} PP, 499.
\textsuperscript{442} PP, 499.
\textsuperscript{443} Mitscherling, Aesthetic Genesis, 5.
\textsuperscript{444} I use the terms ‘subject-pole’ and ‘object-pole’ here provisionally. Not only is the subject of perception a pre-personal body, but as we are about to see, the Flesh is the “the formative medium of the object and the subject” (VI, 147).
\textsuperscript{445} PP, 373 (italics mine).
As we have seen, things express their *carnal essences*, their “rhythm of existence,” to the perceiving body. Sensation is “intentional” in that it brings me into relation with an external being. The body expressing its perceptual powers takes up the expression of *things*, which in turn direct my perception according to their sense.

Whether it is the being of the water sending its reflections towards the cypress trees, or that of my own body palpating the visible with my gaze, being is expressive, and directed towards what it is not. In order to describe this expressive being which both “subject” and “object” share, Merleau-Ponty uses the term *Flesh*. Flesh is not matter, not mind, not a fact, not a representation, nor a substance. Merleau-Ponty describes Flesh as a *style* of being.

To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a *style of being* wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being.

Flesh is an element of being in the sense of Bachelard’s imaginary of the elements. It is a style of being like fire, water, earth or air. Flesh is not an obstacle between our bodies and things, an unfortunate mediation which we could strip away to reveal the naked itself beneath. The ontology of the Flesh is *not* an ontology of appearance and reality.

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446 PP, 248: “Sensation is intentional because I find that in the sensible a certain rhythm of existence is put forward- abduction or adduction- and that, following up this hint, and stealing into the form of existence which is thus suggested to me, I am brought into relation with an external being.” Merleau-Ponty’s meditations on colour in this section are particularly consonant with Paul Klee’s colour theory and Cézanne’s use of colour to construct depth, with blue as recessive (adductive) and yellow as dominant (abductive).

447 EM, 145: “all flesh, even that of the world, radiates beyond itself.”

448 VI, 139 (second italics mine).

449 In his series of radio lectures, Merleau-Ponty refers to Bachelard’s imaginary of the elements as ways of being, which can lend their style to an individual’s life, and to their daydreams. See *The World of Perception*, 65.
Seer and seen are *not* two appearances of an underlying being, but rather two different *ways of being*. As David Morris observes, sensing and sensed are like two gloves, which can reverse into their other-handed counterpart when turned inside out. There is no “non-handed” glove, no being in-itself that underlies them.\(^{450}\) Flesh is that mode of being to which both sensing and sensed belong.

As we have seen, it is this active-passive character—of being intentionally directed beyond oneself while simultaneously taking up an extraneous intention—that characterizes perception. At first blush, one might be tempted to say that perception is a kind of *dialogue* between two kinds of intentionality, mine and that of the world.\(^{451}\) Yet the language of *dialogue*, while it implies the reciprocity of this relation, and resonates on an ethical level, is ontologically misleading, as it indicates two separate entities which then come into relation. In reality, the relationship between the body and the world is much more intimate.

Merleau-Ponty describes the Flesh as “the formative medium of the object and the subject.”\(^{452}\) The subject becomes subject through a certain relation (of activity, seeing, manipulating) to another thing which thereby becomes the object of that relation (as passive, seen, manipulated). As we have seen, this relationship can become reversed through reflection, mirror phenomena, or the presence of other beings. Subject and object emerge when Flesh enters into a certain relationship with itself, when it folds back and *senses itself*.\(^{453}\) Merleau-Ponty compares this relation to that of two mirrors turned towards each

\(^{451}\) This might be supported by Merleau-Ponty’s statement that Nature is “our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.” (PP 373)
\(^{452}\) VI, 147.
\(^{453}\) This formulation of Flesh, or the sensible “sensing itself,” may seem very similar to the Hegelian “thought thinking itself.” Merleau-Ponty is often in implicit dialogue with Hegel (and Marx)
other which produce an indefinite series of images. These images “belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.” Since reversibility constitutes both parties as active or passive, seer or seen, subject or object, the entities cannot be said to pre-exist their relation. As Dufrenne observes,

> Intentionality is in reality the intention of the Being (l’Etre) which is revealed—which is nothing other than its revelation—and which gives rise to the subject and the object in order to reveal itself.

The intentionality (directness, tending) of being is more primordial than subject and object. It is “being’s show of itself through a distance within itself that is exemplified by living movement and desire.” It is this directedness towards what is other and what is still Flesh that constitutes the sense of being.

Sense is neither bestowed by an active constituting subject nor imposed by the world. Throughout this study we have spoken of sense as something which comes into being through the relation between body and world. Yet this statement too could be misleading. If intentionality (directness) is more primordial than either subject or object, and if this is the sense of being, sense could be considered to be ontologically more primordially.
al than either body or world, and not a product of their interaction. As Ted Toadvine argues,

Sense does not originate as the resonance or feed-back loop obtaining between a pre-existing thing and perceiving body, but rather as the resonance from which these moments may be secondarily derived by abstraction.  

Sense is the “ontological vibration” from which subject and object may be secondarily derived. As Merleau-Ponty says,

The body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases.

If sense of the body and the sense of the world are but two segments of the same movement, through which silent Being “comes to show forth its own meaning,” it would seem that the sense of the whole is primary. The sense of the Flesh would be this movement itself, a “happening” or “pure event,” an ontologically primordial relation from which entities may be only secondarily derived.

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457 Toadvine, “Singing the World in a New Key: Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Sense,” 279. See also 280: “Sense is ontologically more primordial than either a sense-bestowing subject or a sense-carrying substance, more basic than the poles of life and world themselves. It is the pure event from which the two orders of subject and object, or the two series of causality and intentionality, split off. Ex-pression presses world and life out of the cauldron of sense. And if sense is ontologically basic, the classic dilemma of teleology falls by the wayside: we no longer need to choose whether nature’s telos is inherent or a projection of subjectivity, since the telos of sense lies at a level deeper than the separation of nature and subjectivity.”

458 VI, 115.

459 VI, 138.

460 EM, 147.


462 Vanzago, in “Relations and the Irrelative: A Relationist Interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Flesh” (67), observes that in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology “relations are more primordial than substances.”
Since the body is a “project of the world,” its sense, its intentional life and its expressive activity could be considered a continuation of that of the world, especially in the pre-reflective mien. Yet this must not suggest that the sense of being is already determined, that it is fully positive and waiting to be “pressed out” by the expressive body. This would be to neglect the self-transformative aspect of expression, on both an artistic and an ontological level. The body encounters the world through a fold in being, in which divergence and kinship make possible their encounter. In this generative divergence in which being senses itself, it also changes itself. Directed by existing sense, expression institutes new possibilities, new forms of life and expression, new sense. While the world does not lack sense before expressive activity, this sense is not fully positive, but a field of possibilities, vectors which motivate, delineated “in filigree.” The sense of the world is an open-ended process of self-generation, which includes human beings, but does not depend on them, and which cannot be characterized positively except through retrospective illusion. The sense of the world is in a state of constant genesis.

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463 It is at this level that the image of the “feedback loop” makes sense.
464 VI, 215.
Chapter Three:  
The Genesis of Sense in Aesthetic Experience

“Philosophy does not take the context as given; it turns back upon it in order to seek the origin and the meaning of the questions and of the responses and the identity of him who questions.”\textsuperscript{465}

Fig. 15. Ernesto Neto, \textit{Walking in Venus Blue Cave}, installation, 2001.

There is a kind of \textit{ethos} to viewing. I must try to leave my theories and preconceptions at the door, or I risk missing what the work is trying to reveal to me entirely.\textsuperscript{466} Yet at the same time, I cannot completely divest myself of all assumptions. My prior experience lingers, whether I like it or not, and forms a horizon for the current work.\textsuperscript{467} Nonetheless,

\textsuperscript{465} VI, 105.
\textsuperscript{466} Here the epoch\'e functions somewhat like Kantian \textit{disinterestedness}, which we recall is \textit{not} indifference, but a lack of bias. It does not preclude active involvement in the work, if that is what the work calls for. In fact, sometimes active involvement is the attitude \textit{required} to fully appreciate the installation; for example, \textit{not} throwing oneself full-body into the squishy space of an Ernesto Neto installation would be the entirely wrong attitude. The point is that the work directs what attitude the viewer should adopt toward it. The epoch\'e allows the viewer to be sensitive enough to the work to be able to respond appropriately.
\textsuperscript{467} Some works even explicitly require this horizon of expectation to function. In Joshua Schwebel’s 2008 NSCAD MFA thesis show, an empty gallery (one of NSCAD’s largest) was exhibited
I try to adopt a posture of openness toward the work. I try not to be defensive or judgmental, I suspend my theories about what I think a work of art is or should be. When I enter the gallery space, I adopt a certain posture. I put my hands behind my back, I open my eyes and I let the work direct me…

I. Phenomenological Reflections on Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s *Lost in the Memory Palace*, AGO 2013

I open a door to a small gallery labeled “Storm Room (2009).” There is a plywood structure in the middle of the room with a ramp leading to a doorway. I cross the threshold and walk into a small room. Rain streams down the windows. Its sound and mottled shadows pervade the room. There are buckets placed at strategic intervals on a peeling white linoleum floor: vain attempts to catch the leaks. The fluorescent lights above me are very dim and flicker constantly. There is a sink in the corner, and a mirror. Beside the mirror, there are papers tacked to the wall with Japanese characters; this is somebody’s space. I move closer to the window and touch the cool surface. Thunder crashes and a flash of light illuminates the room. I jump a little, then I relax. I feel peaceful yet electrified; a dim blue subdued feeling. I want to sit in the middle of the room and just listen to the rain, but there are other viewers coming in…

I open a door to a small gallery labeled “Opera for a Small Room (2005).” There is a plywood structure in the middle of the room. I stand in front of a large opening and look into a room absolutely packed with records, record-players, speakers, and tape after months of hype, including a staged photograph of the artist at work in the studio which even made it into the NSCAD brochure. Here the expectation of the viewer formed the necessary prelude to her disappointment, which, as it turned out, was the subject of the piece. (Sandals, Leah. “Class of 2008.” *Canadian Art*. Winter 2008, pp. 62-69.)
decks. A chandelier crowns the ceiling, too grand for this small space, and a red Persian carpet peeks through the spaces between the piles of records. A man’s voice is speaking in a slow, deep, raspy deadpan: a message in a bottle at the end of the world. At least five sopranos and tenors are climbing toward the dramatic crescendo of their arias from their respective record players. As they soar together, red, blue and green lights accompany them in their anguish: a chorus of light. The voice drones on, “It’s an opera after all, and everybody dies in the end.” A sense of desperate solitude and nostalgia pervades the room like an odour…

I open a door to a small gallery labeled “The Muriel Lake Incident (1999).” There is a plywood structure with an opening. I look through the opening and look down from the “balcony” at a miniature darkened movie theatre with a black and white film playing on the screen. I put on the earphones and shiver a little as someone whispers into my right ear asking me if there is any more popcorn. I can hear her chewing. Someone behind me on my left coughs. In the darkness of the theatre, an auditory space opens up around me, a field different from the one offered to my view…

I open a door to a gallery labeled “The Killing Machine (2007)” (Fig. 16). I enter a darkened room and approach a dim metallic cage. There is a big red button on a plywood box illuminated by a small lamp. A small yellow sticky says “Push,” so I do. Magenta and blue lights come on and illuminate the inside of the cage. There is a dentist’s chair covered in faded pink fur bookended by two robotic arms with pointy, vaguely threatening tips. Music starts and the robotic arms begin to slowly rotate, like a dance. The dentist’s chair tilts backwards, and the robotic arms dip towards it, and away. Part-way through, a disco ball suspended from the top of the cage begins to rotate, throwing
small ‘c’’s on the surrounding gallery walls. One of the robotic arms shines a small precise light at the top of the chair, moving it around searchingly. When the second robotic arm jerks toward the dentist’s chair and flicks out a sharp needle, I wince…

![Image of The Killing Machine installation](image)

**Fig. 16** Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The Killing Machine*, installation, 2007 (detail).

How is it that these objects put together in the right way can so strongly evoke a place, create a mood, and open a world? How is this possible for objects in geometric space? This is a gallery; nobody lives here. It has precise dimensions mapped on the gallery plot. These objects and their like sit in hardware stores around the world without
provoking a second glance. But somehow this room has acquired the contours of lived space. There are no figures in any of the exhibitions, yet the things within have somehow acquired a definite pathos. I feel like I know the man on the tape in the small room of “Opera for a Small Room”—or at least that I would recognize him, sitting at the end of a sad bar, the next time he tries to tell me his life story. I am not in a movie theatre, yet hearing the people on either side of me opens up an auditory space behind me. My body is not the dentist’s chair, but I wince when the needle probes it. Where does the sense of this work come from? From the artist, from me, from the objects in the room?

II. Installation Art and the Active/Passive Viewer

In her historical survey Installation Art, Claire Bishop identifies the activation and de-centering of the viewer as crucial components of Installation Art. Bishop likens the centered subject to the eye at the apex of the visual pyramid. Citing Panofsky, she argues that “Renaissance perspective placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical ‘world’ depicted in the painting.” As we recall, Panofsky likens the kind of subjectivity present in perspective drawings to the Kantian constituting subject. Bishop identifies de-centering with a post-perspectival rejection of the constituting gaze.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of an absolute observer. Space is around us, not in front of us. One of his main criticisms of perspective is that perspective drawings “remain at a distance and do not involve the viewer.” In lived perception,

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468 Bishop, Installation Art: A Critical History, 11. While a full discussion of the political implications of participatory art are beyond the scope of this work, Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” and Rancière’s The Emancipated Spectator provide important critiques of the assumption that participatory art is automatically politically emancipatory.

469 Bishop, Installation Art, 11.

objects seen at a distance remain part of my motor field, and my possible movement towards them is the “maturation” of vision. However, perspective drawings spirit the background away to an unreachable distance where, shrouded in mist and unavailable to touch, it is content to remain as background. In lived perception, the background is always potentially foreground, while in perspective drawings, it can never be anything but background.

The viewer in installation art does not constitute the work of art from a single unified perspective, but rather must move through the work and respond to it as a lived environment. The activation of the viewer is achieved through the requirement of this movement. The writings of the artist Robert Morris bear the stamp of his close reading of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Morris conceives of the relation of a sculpture to the surrounding space as analogous to that between a figure and a ground. Minimalist sculptures are situated in lived space, not on a pedestal or behind the picture plane, but in the same space as the viewer, who can no longer constitute the space of the work from beyond a single unified perspective, but must move through and around the work and respond to it as a lived space. In Minimalist art, the viewer’s movements and the orientation of the body in relation to the work and the surrounding space become essential to the

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471 EM, 124: “It is the natural sequel to, and maturation of, vision.”

472 In *The Emancipated Spectator* Rancière observes that the desire to activate the viewer derives from ancient concerns about spectatorship as a form of political complacency. Plato in the *Republic* worried about the passivity of citizens when faced with a convincing orator, and their susceptibility to rhetoric. Like the denizens of the cave, immobile in front of the spectacle, “to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act” (2). Yet viewing is also an action, as it requires interpretation, and those who act are more contemplative than we often realize (13). Rancière argues that changing the value of the terms active and passive, or activating the viewer still maintains the opposition between viewing and action, knowledge and passivity, and the societal divisions between those who know and those who act. However, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty’s viewer, like his artist, is not only active but active/passive. Spectatorship is therefore neither passive complacency nor active distortion.

unfolding of its sense. Speaking of Robert Morris’ *Untitled (Three L-Beams)* (1965-6) (Fig. 17), Rosalind Krauss observes that:

as we confront one of these massive Ls lying on its side, the other ‘sitting up,’ and the third arched on its two ends, we cannot see all three of their shapes as the ‘same.’ This is because the effect of real space means that each shape takes on a different meaning according to the way a sense of gravitational pull or luminous release affects our experience of the actual thickness and weight of the different ‘arms.’

While for the understanding the shapes are geometrically the same, for the body, the meaning of the shapes changes depending on their orientation in space and in relation to the body. As Merleau-Ponty observes, the body is the “third term” between figure and ground. Every figure stands out against the “double horizon” of the perceptual background and the oriented space of the body.

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Fig. 17 Robert Morris, *Untitled (Three L-Beams)*, painted plywood, 1965.

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474 Krauss et al. *Art Since 1900*, vol. 2, 494.
475 PP, 115.
Furthermore, as Robert Morris observes, “the experience of the work necessarily exists in time.” In Morris’ view, incorporation of temporality within Minimalist work surpasses even the Cubist presentation of simultaneous views of the object, since Cubist painting still presents them on one plane, thereby implying a kind of unity. In Minimalist work, the viewer must move around the work, without synthesizing the many perspectives offered by the work into a single unified whole. For Morris, the sense of a work of art is not located within the object itself. Morris resists the aesthetic “in which what is to be had from the work is located strictly in the specific object.” Rather, meaning emerges from the relation between object, space, and viewer.

While the viewer is activated by installation art in the sense that her movement is necessary for the work to reveal itself, she is also responsive to a context. In many ways the cluster of artistic experiments often collected under the banner of installation art also develop the insight of the importance of context in the genesis of sense. In El Lissitzky’s *Proun Room* (1923) (Fig. 18), shapes are arranged on a wall to form a total Gestalt. The resulting composition is as much a product of the relation between elements, and between figures and ground, as a result of the individual shapes themselves. As Claire Bishop notes, “in terms that anticipate Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied space,” Lissitzky posits space as “‘that which is not looked at through a keyhole’ but which instead surrounds the viewer”.

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477 Cézanne’s presentation of “incompossibles,” often considered a precursor of Cubism, would probably fall short in Morris’ estimation.
479 Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 81. Bishop is here referring to Lissitzky’s 1923 essay which accompanied the exhibition of *Proun Room* (also called *Proun Room*).
In this kind of work, the space between the pieces begins to acquire as much significance as the pieces themselves. The white wall of the gallery space operates as a horizon of significance, a ground which makes other things appear but does not itself appear. In his *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, O’Doherty observes that this horizon of significance may conceal many assumptions that colour the interpretation of the work.

The white wall’s apparent neutrality is an illusion. It stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions…. In an extraordinary strip-tease, the art within bares itself more and more, until it presents formalist end-products and bits of reality from outside—“collaging” the gallery space. The wall’s content becomes richer and richer (maybe a collector should buy an “empty” gallery space).\(^{480}\)

The white wall functions as horizon and field of significance for the work, both perceptually and historically. Yet the lesson is not that the meaning of the work is entirely bestowed on it by its context—after all, as we have seen, a new work has the power to change its context as well—rather, there is a circularity of sense between work and context.

The viewer of installation art is not only active in moving through the space, but is responsive to the context as well. My exploratory movements respond to the style of the space. I creep cautiously around the curves of a Richard Serra sculpture, throwing my voice when I reach the centre to catch its reverberations off the hard steel. I throw myself full-body into an Ernesto Neto installation and open myself to its squishy space. In this kind of work, as Boetzkes writes, “meaning emerges through the spectator’s motility, actions and gestures in response to the artwork.” Installation art, as the exploration of the importance of context to the generation of meaning, is a reversible relation to the extent that the meaning of the work is a result of a complex circularity between artist and world, object and space, and viewer. Yet to what does the viewer respond? How is the being of the work of art capable of directing my experience according to its sense?

III. Proust and the Carnal Ideality of the Work of Art

On the one hand, the work of art has a certain materiality, what Heidegger might have called its “thing-ness.” A painting “hangs on the wall like a rifle or a hat.” It can get mouldy, or become a nest for a cat, like Turner’s paintings sometimes did, when left in

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481 Boetzkes, “Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh,” 705.
the damper corner of his studio.\footnote{Finlay, \textit{Colour: Travels Through the Paintbox}, 149.} A Rembrandt can be used as an ironing board, as Duchamp eagerly recommended.\footnote{Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades’,” 4.}

Yet the work of art is \textit{not simply material} in that when I interact with it like a thing, something is missing. Merleau-Ponty recounts a story of a small boy who puts on his grandmother’s spectacles and takes up her storybook hoping to find in it the stories she used to tell him. But the boy is disappointed, for where he expects a \textit{story}, he sees nothing but black and white. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

\begin{quote}
For the child the ‘story’ and the thing expressed are not ‘ideas’ or ‘meanings’, nor are speaking or reading ‘intellectual operations’. The story is a world which there must be some way of magically calling up by putting on spectacles and leaning over a book.\footnote{PP, 467.}
\end{quote}

Where the boy expects a world to be called into being by the manipulation of certain objects and the performance of certain rituals, all he finds is brute things—spectacles he can’t see through, a book he can’t read. The objects obstinately refuse to call the world into being, and no matter how hard he looks at the book, he can’t see the characters crawling around inside.

On the other hand, the work of art has an element of ideality, since it can be encountered by different people at different times. Proust’s little phrase can be played by different musicians. In the painting, “the smile of a long-dead monarch … keeps producing and reproducing itself on the surface of the canvas”\footnote{EM, 130. Merleau-Ponty here invokes Sartre in \textit{Nausea}, who describes Roquentin’s visit to the museum where the town’s elders are immortalized in official portraits. Roquentin feels “the looks of a hundred and fifty pairs of eyes.” (\textit{Nausea}, 83)} Yet this is an ideality with a curious temporality. Proust’s little phrase had to be written, Sartre’s painting had to be
painted. They came into being. Ideas are not eternal, but must be created, expressed, instituted, even if once they are created they seem to stand outside time.\(^{487}\) Even geometry requires institution, the creation of an inter-subjectively accessible cultural object of thought through a process of idealization from the life-world. The work of art is an ideality that comes into being.

The ideality of the work of art is also inextricably linked to the sensory. When dealing with language we have a tendency to forget the contingent genesis of sense. Sedimented for public use, it seems that language transparently carries our thoughts into the minds of others without adding anything of its own.\(^{488}\) Yet even language is not a transparent vehicle, since when pressed, we can only explain the meanings of words in relation to one another. Language has its own field of sense made up of lateral diacritical relations between signs, in addition to the “halos” of meaning which surround each word due to its history, use, etymology, sound, and shape. As thinking, speaking beings, we gradually enter into the field of linguistic sense, altering and being altered by it.\(^{489}\) While

\(^{487}\) PP, 453: “That which is called an idea is necessarily linked to an act of expression, and owes to it its appearance of autonomy. It is a cultural object, like the church, the street, the pencil or the Ninth Symphony. It may be said in reply that the church can be burnt down, the street and pencil destroyed, and that, if all the scores of the Ninth Symphony and all musical instruments were reduced to ashes, it would survive only for a few brief years in the memory of those who had heard it, whereas on the other hand the idea of the triangle and its properties are imperishable. In fact, the idea of the triangle with its properties, and of the quadratic equation, have their historical and geographical area, and if the tradition in which they have been handed down to us, and the cultural instruments which bear them on, were to be destroyed, fresh acts of creative expression would be needed to revive them in the world.”


\(^{489}\) While it is beyond the scope of this project to fully explore Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language, I will note that Merleau-Ponty argues that the child enters into the field of linguistic sense through growing familiarity with the general expressive style of a language: “The whole of the spoken language surrounding the child snaps him up like a whirlwind, tempts him by its internal articulations, and brings him *almost* up to the moment when all this noise begins to mean something. The untiring way in which the train of words crosses and recrosses itself, and the emergence one day of a certain phonemic scale according to which discourse is visibly composed, fi-
the separability of ideas and language is often assumed, “the idea of music without sounds is ridiculous.” Musical ideas are not indifferent to their “medium” like a spirit of music incarnated after the fact. Musical ideas are reciprocally enveloped by their sonorous medium.

In In Search of Lost Time, Swann first encounters the curious being of the work of art while listening to the little phrase of Vinteuil’s sonata. When Swann first hears the little phrase, it at once suggests to him,

a world of inexpressible delights, of whose existence, before hearing it, he had never dreamed, into which he felt that nothing else could initiate him; and he had been filled with love for it, as with a new and strange desire.

After the little phrase stops, and all is quiet, Swann’s memory fashions a facsimile of the phrase, sketchy and provisional, allowing him to compare it with others that follow to form a more distinct impression of the phrase. Swann thinks at first that the meaning of the phrase might be found in its musical notation. He examines the score and tries to attribute the “‘withdrawn and chilly tenderness’ that makes up its essence or its sense” to the musical arrangement. But while he is thinking of these signs and this meaning, he no longer has the little phrase itself, but “bare values substituted for the mysterious entity he had perceived, for the convenience of his understanding.” The little phrase cannot be reduced to the products of reflection.

nally sways the child over to the side of those who speak.” (ILVS, 78). This is how the child enters into the field of linguistic sense whose doors, one might think, “open only from within.”

490 PP, 221.
492 VI, 150.
493 VI, 150.
Yet neither is the musical idea identical with the performance. As Proust says, “The musicians were not nearly so much playing the little phrase as performing the rites on which it insisted before it would consent to appear.”494 The ritual required to conjure the little phrase can be slightly altered without affecting the little phrase itself. The little phrase can be played at different times by different people, more or less badly as Odette’s hackneyed performance demonstrates, and remain the same little phrase. The little phrase therefore has a certain ideality.495

Nonetheless, the little phrase must be heard to do its work. The listeners at the dinner party at the Verdurins’ can appreciate what they are shown by the little phrase, but they would not recognize it in real life. Not only are they incapable of constituting it, they could not even recognize it. The meaning of the phrase is not something ideally bestowed on it by them, since they do not possess it beforehand. The meaning of the little phrase is not separable from it. It is not an abstraction produced by consciousness.496 As Merleau-Ponty says,

The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter is on the bread, like a second layer of ‘psychic reality’ spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain.497

The ideality of the little phrase is “an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions.”498 It is what Merleau-Ponty calls a carnal ideality. When

495 Proust, In Search of Lost Time, Volume I: Swann’s Way, 496: “Swann had regarded musical motifs as actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadow, unknown, impenetrable to the human mind, but none the less perfectly distinct from one another, unequal among themselves in value and significance.”
496 As Toadvine observes in “Singing the World in a New Key: Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Sense” (281, n. 7), ideality is “the pivot or frame of being, rather than as an abstraction produced by consciousness.”
497 VI, 155.
faced with a carnal ideality, separating the essence from the appearance would mean to lose both. While works of art and the experience of the world disclose ideas,

these ideas, unlike those of that science [of Lavoisier and Ampère], cannot be detached from the sensible appearances and erected into a second positivity. … the explicitation does not give us the idea itself; it is but a second version, of it, a more manageable derivative.499

The meaning of the little phrase is not separable from the sound of the notes; it is their way of being. Just as words have a “semantic thickness,” a meaning that clings to their history, uses, etymology, sounds, even the shape of their letters, that make it possible for them to signify beyond existing conventions, artistic ideas have a thickness as well.500 The sound of the little phrase is crucial to its being; it is not an appearance, manifestation, or incarnation of something that lies behind it as a reality.

It is significant that Swann could not have anticipated the effect of the little phrase on him, that it would take his life on another course. Such is the power of great art. Proust says that great artists “awaken in us the emotion corresponding to the theme they have discovered, of showing us what richness, what variety lies hidden, unknown to us.”501 The little phrase showed Swann “a conception of love and happiness whose distinctive character [style] he recognized at once.”502 This conception of love had immediate sense for Swann. Yet it was nonetheless surprising, since it is was not of his own making.

This is a meaning that changes across time. As Swann hears the little phrase again and again, its meaning begins to change, as previous memories compound on later expe-

498 VI, 152.
499 VI, 49.
500 “Man and Adversity,” in The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, 199.
riences. The little phrase becomes the essence of Swann’s love for Odette, and finally a world of feeling unavailable to Swann. Great works of art have the power to direct the viewer according to their sense, in Swann’s case to institute feelings for Odette where none existed before. The sense of a work of art is its style, its way of being a musical phrase or a painting, as well as its way of guiding the experience of those who experience them.

The meaning of the little phrase is not audible in the phrase, like one of the notes which compose it, nor is the meaning of a painting visible, like one of its colours. It is “between” the notes, directing them, just as Julien Sorel’s intention to kill is between Stendhal’s words, in their style. Meaning is of the order of the invisible.

Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (membrure), and the invisible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it, it is the Nichturpräsentierbar which is presented to me as such within the world— one cannot see it there and every effort to see it there makes it disappear, but it is in the line of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it (in filigree).

The sense of an expression, the direction and meaning that bear it from within, is not itself visible. It is the invisible network of vectors which guide the experience of the viewer.

As an ontological term, the invisible is not a de facto invisible, an object that happens to be hidden for me, or the obverse of the cube. It is not an absolute invisible, an in-itself which would have nothing to do with the visible. “Rather it is the invisible of this

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503 As Merleau-Ponty says, “we do not see, do not hear the ideas, and not even with the mind’s eye or the third ear: and yet they are there, behind the sounds or between them, recognizable” (VI, 151).

504 VI, 215.
world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and inter-
rior possibility, the Being of this being.”

It is the latent meaning of the world, its levels and norms, the *carnal essences* of the things as well as the *carnal ideality* of the work of art. The invisible is “what, relative to the visible, could nevertheless not be seen as a thing (the existentials of the visible, its dimensions, its non-figurative inner framework).”

Ideas are not simply abstractions but are the latent sense of the world, its style. Yet as we have seen, sense cannot be expressed without altering itself. In this way there is a reversibility between visible and invisible; they are the obverse and reverse of one another.

**IV. “Seeing According To”**

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty the work of art is not merely material, nor is it purely ideal. Painting is not a representation akin to Descartes’ “mental images.” Nor is it a "faded copy, a trompe l’oeil or another thing.” Rather, it is a *carnal ideality* that is capable of directing the viewer along with its sense. When I hear the little phrase, I do not possess it, it possesses me. When I see a painting,

... I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to it, or with it.

505 VI, 151.
506 VI, 257.
507 VI, 119: “as the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered. Like every style, they are elaborated within the thickness of being and, not only in fact but also by right, could not be detached from it, to be spread out on display under the gaze.”
508 EM, 126.
509 EM, 126.
Works of art have the ability to direct the viewer’s experience in accordance with their own sense in a number of ways. Firstly, the carnal idea is a kind of level, or dimension, a meaning which we do not constitute, and in terms of which later experience will be situated. The work of art structures our subsequent experience. Exiting La Monte Young and Marion Zazeela’s Dream House—a magenta lit visual field and continuous droning sound which have inhabited a New York apartment for the last 20 years—the whole street outside has a green cast, according to the afterimage. The magenta light has formed a light level. The sound of the street outside also seems altered. Leaving the Cézanne show, one stumbles on the step. This is understandable since, in a Cézanne painting, space can be flayed open, and the step might not be where it seems to be. Works of art direct our subsequent perceptual experience according to their sense.

Secondly, works of art found historical traditions, establish values in the form of goals to be achieved, and form the viewer’s expectations for future works of art. In this way a work of art lays out a new norm, an a priori for future perception. As Proust observes,

People of taste tell us nowadays that Renoir is a great nineteenth-century painter. But in so saying they forget the element of Time, and that it took a great deal of time, even at the height of the nineteenth century, for Renoir to be hailed as a great artist….Women pass in the street, different from those we formerly saw, because they are Renoirs, those Renoirs we persistently refused to see as women.

If we let ourselves be guided by a work of art, we may see the world differently afterward. Renoir establishes new norms for the art of painting since, “by his painting, he

510 See VI, 151.
511 Personal recollection of Melissa Joakim.
512 Personal recollection of Dr. Jeff Mitscherling.
himself defined the conditions under which he intended to be approved." 514 Art establishes new values for the evaluation of future works of art.

Thirdly, a work of art has an intentional structure that guides viewing. I do not need to already possess the meaning of the work in my past experiences or private bric-a-brac in order to “associate” this meaning with the meaningless materials in front of me. Rather, the work of art cuts out “fissures in my private universe through which other thoughts irrupt.” 515 Just as when I listen to the other speak in conversation, I am “surprised to find the track of an alien thought.” 516 We do not just see the work of art as an object, we see according to it. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson. The reader or spectator who follows the clues of the book or painting, by setting up stepping stones and rebounding from side to side guided by the obscure clarity of a particular style, will end by discovering what the artist wanted to communicate. The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work of art united these separate lives; it will no longer exist in only one of them like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium, nor will it exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell undivided in several minds, with a claim on every possible mind like a perennial acquisition. 517

The work of art directs me toward its own meaning. In this way works of art are “self-teaching.” The style of a work allows the viewer to join the writer “at the virtual centre of the writing.” In The Red and the Black, Stendhal describes Julien Sorel’s trip to Verrières to kill Mme de Rênal “according to a cadence of cold passion that decided what was visi-

514 ILVS, 100.
515 “Man and Adversity,” 199. Here is another paradox of the seer played out in the register of the viewer: If in order to “understand” a work of art, I must already possess its meaning, then it can never show me anything I don’t already “know.” But if, on the other hand, its meaning is totally “outside” me, it will be unintelligible. (Recall our earlier mention of Plato’s Meno.)
516 PP, 361.
517 SNS, 19-20.
ble and what invisible.” Julien’s desire to kill is never mentioned explicitly, but it is there, not in the words but “between” them, in their style, as his emotional state is not given directly but indirectly, in the description of his behaviour. It is style that, as the invisible sense of the work, allows the reader to “respond to [its] appeal” and join the writer “at the virtual centre of the writing.”

Style has an inter-subjective character and is therefore often invisible to the one who possesses it. Because of this, the sense of his own work often eludes the artist, who sees only his own striving to answer the call of the world.

He is no more capable of seeing his paintings than the writer is capable of reading his work. It is in others that expression takes on its relief and really becomes signification.

Just as in perception, the meaning of the work is not constituted by the subject-pole of the artist or viewer, nor is the artist or viewer the passive recipient of fully formed meanings from the work itself. Rather, the artist or viewer stands in a chiasmatic relation with the work, just as I am with the world when I perceive. Reciprocally enveloped by the work, as artist or viewer I approach the work with openness in the epochē, letting myself be guided by the work. Yet even in viewing a work of art, there is a moment of activity as well.

While a viewer sees according to the latent sense of the work, her interpretation is not a literal reproduction of its sense. As Merleau-Ponty says, interpretation is neither

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518 ILVS, 113.
519 ILVS, 113.
520 ILVS, 91.
521 ILVS, 89.
literal reproduction nor inevitable distortion. Rather, it is the bringing to expression of the latent sense of the work, its *unthought*.

The reason why we think that interpretation is restricted to either inevitable distortion or literal reproduction is that we want the meaning of a man’s works to be wholly positive and by rights susceptible to an inventory which sets forth what is and is not in those works. But this is to be deceived about works and thought. 522

The sense of a work of art is not fully positive, not on its surface, ready to view. Rather, works of art have a fecundity of sense, brought into being by their institution, which yet open out onto something else that the author could not have imagined. If the public that the artist aims at is the one “his oeuvre will elicit,” it is easy for this public to judge the artist too harshly according to his own standards. 523 And yet for the author to have brought the sense of his work into full positivity within his own time would have required him to “jump over his own shadow,” 524 to transcend the limits of his own time in order to close the circle of possibility opened up by his own works once and for all. Yet ideas resist such closure. Ideas always retain this latent sense, this *unthought* towards which they strive, “as if it were essential to the essence that it be for tomorrow”. 525 Cultural ideas cannot be characterized in full positivity without remainder. Yet this is not a defect. On the contrary, it is this fecundity of sense that constitutes the greatness of a work of art.

Sense does not lie within the work itself like a secret core: the “order of meaning is not eternal.” 526 Nor is sense a cloth arbitrarily laid over the work by the viewer. Sense is the unfolding of the work in time, and in the lives of others. One implication of this is

523 ILVS, 110.
524 Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, 150.
525 VI, 119.
526 ILVS, 106.
that the viewer is needed to bring a work of art to the expression of its own sense. The sense of a work of art is in a state of constant genesis as its historical task continues. It inaugurates a field of possibilities in such a manner that it can be taken up in ways impossible for its creator to imagine.

The institution of a work, like the institution of a love, [intends a] sense as open sense, which develops by means of proliferation, by curves, decentering and recentering, zigzag, ambiguous passage.…

The viewer contributes to the sense of a work by taking up the possibilities it institutes, by *thinking with or painting with*, the philosopher or artist. While this changes the meaning of the work, it also furthers and deepens the expression of its own sense.

This reversible relation with the viewer is needed for cultural ideas to live and grow—not preserved as separate from life in the sterile display cases of the museum, made into an objective sense, but as part of the flow of human culture, given a new life through being taken up anew, and changed as they participate in the ongoing adventure of history.

In aesthetic experience, the living body encounters another way of being, the carnal expressivity of things and other bodies. Spatial, historical and social context provides the horizon of significance for the sense of the work of art. Yet this context does not causally determine the sense, since viewers have a conditioned freedom to respond to the work of art in various ways. While the viewer’s exploratory movements are required to bring the work to the expression of its own latent sense, these movements are guided by the style of the work itself. Directed by this invisible sense, the viewer opens up a circuit of involvement allowing the sense of the work to reverberate back on itself and generate

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527 IP, 48.
new fields of possibility for the institution of new sense. Consequently, “the genesis of meaning is never completed...”

V. Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, sense is not a result of the constitutive activity of the subject as in idealism, nor does it lie fully formed in the in-itself as in realism. While the body in its intentional life has its sense, its privileged behaviours, and its equilibrium, these modify themselves in response to the sense of the world. While the world has its sense, its levels and its style, this sense is disclosed through the exploratory motions of the body. While perception has its sense, its aesthetic logos, this sense emerges and is transformed through the paradoxical process of expression and sedimentation. While expression is inspired by the latent sense of the world, and by the historical field of sense provided by tradition, the process of expression institutes new sense in the cultural field. While the viewer actively exploring the work of art is guided by the invisible vectors of its sense, in bringing the latent sense of the work to expression, she brings new sense into being.

In perception, expression and aesthetic experience, reversibility is therefore the structure of the genesis and self-transformation of sense. Sense emerges as body and world, artist and medium, viewer and work encounter one another across a fold in being, and through kinship and divergence, passivity and activity, give rise to new fields of sense, and new expressive possibilities for art and for life.

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528 ILVS, 79.
Bibliography

List of abbreviations of works by Merleau-Ponty:

CD: “Cézanne’s Doubt”
EM: “Eye and Mind”
ILVS: “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”
IP: Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the College de France (1954–1955)
PP: Phenomenology of Perception
PW: The Prose of the World
S: Signs
SB: The Structure of Behavior
SNS: Sense and Non-Sense
VI: The Visible and the Invisible


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