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REVIEW ESSAY

Sensuous Presencing and Artistic Creation: The Aesthetic Legacy of Merleau-Ponty's Thought

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While the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty remained engaged with artistic creation throughout his entire work, which continues to inspire artists today in manifold ways, no systematic and artistically inclusive study of this dimension of his thought has existed so far. *Du sensible à l'œuvre* fills this gap by offering not only an in-depth study of Merleau-Ponty's aesthesiology and aesthetics by international Merleau-Ponty scholars spanning three generations, but also a rich selection of essays by art critics and theorists who assess the impact of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on their own artistic fields, including cinema, music, literature, film, dance, and installation art.

KEYWORDS Merleau-Ponty, aesthesiology, aesthetics, artistic creation, expression, intercorporeity, image, style

EMMANUEL ALLOA and ADNEN JDEY, eds., *Du sensible à l'óuvre: Esthétiques de Merleau-Ponty*, Bruxelles: La Lettre volée, 2012, $31.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-2-87317-379-1.

Although Maurice Merleau-Ponty remained engaged, whether explicitly or more tacitly, with artistic creation (or institution) throughout the spectrum of his thought, which continues to inspire artists (even in disciplines that he neglected, such as dance and theater), there has not so far existed a systematic and artistically inclusive study of the aesthesiological/aesthetic dimension of his thought and of its contemporary import. This lack has not been due just to the vagaries of scholarship, but rather to the challenge presented by a thought that refuses any philosophical appropriation of art (or even an attempt to define its very being), yet is willing to exile philosophy from its self-containment and to bring it into a direct confrontation with the complexity, richness, and depth of sensuous presencing. *Du*

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sensible à l'óuvre. Esthétiques de Merleau-Ponty, edited by Emmanuel Alloa and Adnen Jdey, not only remedies this lack but does so with a philosophical perspicacity, clarity, and depth, and with an artistically inclusive scope as well as a competence and sensitivity that stays consistently in touch with the very pulse of artistic creation. These qualities jointly promise the work a place of pivotal and lasting importance in Merleau-Ponty scholarship and aesthetics.

The book's three sections guide the reader from the Merleau-Pontyan interconnections between the aesthesiological and the aesthetic to the dialogues between his thought and artistic practices, and on to open horizons still to be explored. The opening chapter of the first section, by **Bernhard Waldenfels**, is focused on seeing in or through images and explores Merleau-Ponty's transformation of his Husserlian heritage. Although Husserl's analyses of imaginal (*bildhaftes*) seeing are innovative in that they reject any understanding of the image as a copy or double in favor of treating it as involving a specific form of intentionality, he nevertheless maintained, as Waldenfels points out, that "our experience presupposes a fundamental layer of material givens … out of which objects are formed" (48).[1] Inspired by *Gestalt* psychology, Merleau-Ponty seeks instead to situate the imaginal dimension at the very core of perception (so that, as he often states, perception already stylizes and is primordially expressive). Creative expression, however, comes into explicit focus and gains a certain autonomy only in the early 1950s, bringing to the forefront the question—which is fundamentally ontological rather than phenomenological—as to the origin of "the expressive process of the world" (59). In virtue of the chiasmatic reversibility of flesh recognized by the late Merleau-Ponty, this process passes through the image which allows the event of seeing to become itself visible. Waldenfels is careful, however, not to allow reversibility to displace reciprocity and responsiveness. The painterly image, in particular, is not any sort of restitution, but a creative response to the solicitations of visibility, and the hiatus or asymmetry introduced by responsiveness means that "the event of expression never stabilizes itself" (69).

Waldenfels' essay introduces the guiding themes of the section's remaining essays, namely expression, intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity), the privilege accorded to vision, and style. Taking up the theme of expression, **Jenny Slatman**, who is concerned to liberate aesthetics from its customary restriction to art theory, characterizes *aisthēsis* as a vital and primary communication with the world, in the context of which the subject becomes "a hollow or a fold that makes and remakes itself" (74). Although Merleau-Ponty's notion of aesthesiology may, as she notes, be indebted to Husserl, it can fruitfully be explored in relation to Aristotle's *De Anima*, which allows the senses a genuine role in the genesis of meaning. For Slatman, this aesthesiological creativity or *poiēsis* passes through the negativity of desire which interlinks the aesthesiological with the libidinal body. To sense is ultimately "to express the world" (83); but nonetheless this expansion of the scope of expression, leaves one, as Slatman indicates, still at a loss as to explicating artistic creation.

[1] All translations from the French are my own.

Ronald Bonan also questions the bond between aesthesiology and aesthetics, with a focus on the libidinal dimension of sentience and of the way in which, for Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity) is prefigured by synergic sensory corporeity (here one could, following Slatman's lead, explore a link to the *koinē aisthēsis* of the *De Anima*). Bonan points to the symbolic matrices inherent in sentience which allow for an upsurge of the invisible as "the proper object of the aesthetic experience" (94). Although Bonan notes that Merleau-Ponty discusses implicit symbolism in the *Nature* courses, he does not point out his tracing it back to animal sentience and experience, and to his formulating the notion of inter-animality (which radically displaces intersubjectivity). The passage from implicit symbolism to the properly aesthetic dimension involves, for Bonan, the three structural moments of the body's "take" (*prise*) on the world, which is always already a repetition or *reprise*, and finally the supplementary reflection he calls *surprise*.

Returning to the questions (first raised by Waldenfels) concerning Merleau-Ponty's Husserlian heritage, and of the image, **Eliane Escoubas** finds that Merleau-Ponty's articulations of "the *logos* of sensible world" are importantly prefigured in Husserl's *Ideen II*, even though Husserl privileged touch over vision. Husserl, moreover, remained in thrall to the primacy of consciousness, and as for the image, Escoubas argues, he tends to treat it as an object or thing. Analyzing Merleau-Ponty's privileging of vision, Escoubas reflects that vision's reversibility implies that it does not stem from an act of consciousness, that it presupposes the alterity of others, and that it opens immediately upon the flesh of the world. One may perhaps call some of her justificatory analysis into question in that, for instance, the disqualification of hearing as to involving alterity is not obvious, and in that she herself notes that Husserl recognized a reflective reversibility (without the Merleau-Pontyan notion of *écart* however) in touch. Important as it is, the non-closure or *écart* of sensory reflection and reversibility is not unique to vision whose Merleau-Pontyan privileging may thus remain somewhat enigmatic.

Adnen Jdey focuses on Merleau-Ponty's rarely discussed notion of "style," which, far from being primarily aesthetic, is "transversal" to his thought (its aesthetic sense being derivative). It fundamentally concerns the individuation of the sensible and has ontological import. As early as *The Structure of Behavior*, it functions as intentionality in its natal condition. The body's role is ambiguous here, in that it is at once structured by a sensible field but also structures that field's possibilities of signification.

In "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (and in the unfinished manuscript of *The Prose of the World*), style carries a transcendental function as "what renders possible all signification" (122). The expressive life of language foregrounded in these texts (although not dissevered from the perceptual stylization that brings into play an "allusive logic of the world") is characterized by a dynamic of temporalization for which the spacing of *écart* is crucial.

Reflecting on the modalities of temporalization proper to the institution of a sense, Jdey notes Merleau-Ponty's subversion of the Husserlian understanding of *Stiftung* (and of *reprise* or *Nachstiftung*), which remain bound to transcendental constitution. Sense for Merleau-Ponty is not conserved in self-identity, but rather,

since it always exceeds itself, it functions as the exigency of a future (which is in no way circumscribed). The order of institution is non-positive, since it derives from the "natural negativity" of a spacing (*écart*) of sense and of diacritical variation. The stylistic institution of the products of culture thus proceeds in a tacit and provisional manner as a work of differentiation.

Jdey points out the double "decentering" at work in the logic of style which allows one to grasp the individual in and as the modalities of the process of individuation and which also, as differentiation intrinsic to the sensible, yields a stylistic of flesh as "cohesion without concept."

The essays that make up the book's first section have here been discussed in full because they are thematically interconnected. In contrast, the further sections focused on *Dialogues* and *Horizons* offer a richly diversified spectrum of themes and approaches. In the interest of keeping this review to an appropriate length, one essay from each section will be discussed in detail, and the remaining ones more summarily. As it happens, the essays chosen for detailed discussion are, for both sections, the first.

Mauro Carbone explores Merleau-Ponty's dialogue, in late texts and lecture notes, with the pictorial thought of Paul Klee, specifically with his understanding of artistic creation as a taking hold of things, or of visible presencing, in their very genesis. Merleau-Ponty's own quest is for a thought that can grasp the world and history in their natality (*à l'état naissant*) and that can accomplish what he considers to be the essential unthought of Husserl's thought: an ontological rehabilitation of the sensible. He finds such an ontological articulation to be already spontaneously at work in art, particularly in literature. With reference to Rimbaud's *Lettre du voyant* and Max Ernst's painterly appropriation of its thought (making the painter's task one of showing forth "what sees itself in him"), Merleau-Ponty develops the notion of "Voyance" (which could perhaps, although awkwardly, be translated as "Visioning") to indicate the ways in which vision (always non-positive) allows for a presencing of what is absent or invisible. To see then is not to represent, but rather "to second" (a term which does not oppose activity and passivity) "the *auto-monstration* of the sensible universe" within which one is situated (150). "Voyance" thus indicates the mutation in the interrelation between humans and being that Merleau-Ponty discerns in confronting philosophical thought with the researches of modern painting. Essentially this mutation renders the interrelations carnal rather than *purely* ideal; and Merleau-Ponty, in this connection, thematizes the "carnal essences" (with reference to Proust) which mark what Carbone characterizes felicitously as "universality through singularity" (153).

The mutation necessitates, for Merleau-Ponty, a rethinking of philosophy which, like literature, "makes [one] see through words." The seeing involved is no pure *intuitus mentis*, but once again a seconding from within, akin to Heideggerian releasement or *Seinlassen*. The language that accomplishes this releasement is then "the resonance of the silence that the sensible dwells in" (157). If philosophy must, according to Merleau-Ponty, open up the concept rather than summarily destroying it, *con-cipere* will have to be taken in its literal sense of grasping (receiving, holding) together without domination.

Taking up Merleau-Ponty's interconnection of philosophy with literature, **Benedetta Zaccarello** focuses on his study of Paul Valéry in his 1953 lecture course, *Researches on the Literary Use of Language*. Valéry allows him to explore the tensions between sensibility and abstraction, or the tenuous borderlines of literary language; but Valéry also existentially took upon himself the travail and doubt that Merleau-Ponty traces in Cézanne. Indeed, as Zaccarello points out, his Cézanne bears the traits of Valéry's figure of Degas (who again echoes Valéry's Leonardo)—artists with intense quests and solitary or difficult lives. The task of the writer for Valéry is to find "the language of his art while going toward that which is thing, which has no name, which is mute," and which thus exacts a loss or dissolution of the self (174). If Valéry enacted the difficulty of doing so in his crisis of 1892 and his long silence, that silence (followed by a return to poetry in 1917) also brings to articulation the limits of language, of the self, and of visions of the world, together with the conceptuality of philosophy, yielding a speech that is sensuous yet theoretical, or a double movement of *praxis* and theory.

Barbara Formis offers a rich analysis of Merleau-Ponty's discussion, in "Eye and Mind," of painting's and sculpture's ability non-mimetically to convey the temporal dynamics of the body in motion. She situates it in reference to the nineteenth-century controversies surrounding the photographic documentation of equine gallop by Eadweard Muybridge and the chronophotography of Jules-Etienne Marey, and she also carries it forward to Deleuze and contemporary cinema. As she points out, Merleau-Ponty (whose thought on the issue is indebted to Bergson and Rodin) understands the artistic rendering of movement in terms of and as anticipating cinematic techniques.

If both Muybridge's meticulous empiricism and Marey's search for movement's essential figure fail to convey genuine motion, they do so because they offer visual images from without rather than the lived experience of motion, and because they falsify time's indivisible dynamics by treating it as a succession of discrete instants. The body in motion, moreover, experiences itself as anchored both within itself and upon its substrate or ground. To convey motion, art must (as artists such as Géricault, Delacroix, Rodin, or Giacometti recognized) abandon the mimetic schema of representation to seek in incompossibility and in virtuality motion's "secret ciphers;" and this is also what cinema as an art of motion optimally achieves.

Concluding *Dialogues*, **Lambert Dousson** addresses the ambiguous position of music for Merleau-Ponty (and indeed for philosophy generally). For Merleau-Ponty, who tends to marginalize as well as metaphorize music, it falls short of expressing the fissioning or dehiscent character of being, and to reveal it in its "wild" or pre-objective state.

Dousson considers atonal music (which Carbone also discusses in relation to non-figurative painting). He notes (with particular reference to Boulez) that it threatens with a radical formalism that repudiates communication and that has a striking affinity to the scientific operationalism that Merleau-Ponty criticizes in the opening section of "Eye and Mind" It seems then that, whether conceived (in its classical form) as indivision without fission or, (in its atonal form) as fission without indivision, music falls short of genuinely expressing flesh.

Nonetheless, true to its ambiguous position, Merleau-Ponty also understands music otherwise: as being, like painting, a primary modality of interrogating the sensible/sentient body and the sensible world, and as possessing metaphysical import. Among the considerations that orient his thought in this direction are the phonic (and often tonal) character of language, the re-inscription of movement in phonation and hearing, and the fact that silence "is this dimension of immanent negativity that structures the world of auditory sense" (229). There is, of course, also the circumstance (deserving perhaps a separate treatment) that Paul Klee was profoundly involved with music; but most fundamentally, Dousson concludes that in music time and space rejoin one another, and that music is therefore revelatory of genesis.

Paule Gioffredi's article that opens the *Horizons* section is a marvel. Whereas Merleau-Ponty neglects dance, and philosophy in general (even aesthetics) has neglected contemporary dance, Gioffredi notes that choreographers, dancers, and dance critics draw on Merleau-Ponty's thought. She offers a finely nuanced phenomenological analysis of Mùa, a 1995 solo work by Emmanuelle Huynh which explicitly refers to a phrase from "The Intertwining, the Chiasm." With constant reference to this chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, she explores in particular the modes in which the invisible permeates and sustains the visual self-presentation of this work. It does so not only in the opening (and longest) sequence in which Huynh dances in darkness (while the cellist on stage remains initially silent), and in which her nude body becomes barely discernible in its "flexuous line," in a commingling of presence and absence. Even in the second part, in which Huynh dances in diffuse light, in transparent dress, and with her eyes closed, the visual and auditory performance retreats into depth dimensions that deny it any planar accessibility; and when, in the short final part, the dancer moves toward a light source in a manner than seems more spontaneously interpretable, her movements nonetheless inscribe themselves within horizons of invisibility.

Gioffredi is careful to note that the refusals discussed do not amount to an immersion in negativity that would undermine the work's experiential impact; and she also trains her analysis not only on the work itself, but equally on the ever-changing modulations of the spectator's own sense of his or her embodiment in communion with the work. In conclusion, she points out that the Merleau-Pontyan texts that allow for a phenomenological interrogation of choreography and dance are not necessarily those that address the body's motility or motor schema, since what is at stake concerns the interrelations of body and world in their reciprocity, together with "the spectacularity of presence" (257). Merleau-Ponty, of course, also explores this spectacularity in terms of animal appearance in the second of the *Nature* courses (which the contributors to this volume do not invoke). Finally, Gioffredi poses the question (which is left open) in what ways the study of dance may open up new perspectives on Merleau-Ponty's thought.

Whereas both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan privilege painting, **Rosamaria Salvatore** turns to cinema to explore both the invisible of the visible in its spacings, gaps, and folds and the Lacanian reversibility of the look (*regard*) that springs from desire. In the work of Dziga Vertov and Michelangelo Antonioni, she traces the look's disorientation toward the in-between. For Lacan, the look is not

only discontinuous and refers back to a void or lack; but the subject finds itself originarily looked at from everywhere (rather than by the personal Other). With great subtlety, Salvatore explores the look in the films of Roberto Rossellini and Michael Haneke, to turn at last to the powerful experience of light itself as "a visible that looks-back well before the presence of a seer" (269) in the films of Ingmar Bergmann and Philippe Garrel.

Fabrice Bourlez re-interprets Merleau-Ponty's "thought from within" by reference to the sculptural work of Richard Serra which involves the viewer (who cannot contemplate it from a detached or fixed vantage point) in an altered experience of space in which inside and outside cannot be dissevered. Structuralist critics of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, from Lyotard and Deleuze to Foucault, have accused it of insensitivity to the tension between saying and seeing and of disregarding heterotopies calling for "thoughts [that are] impossible in the light of mundane life" (285; the phrase is italicized) in favor of a utopian, and all-embracing, harmony of flesh (perhaps taking the place of a Leibnizian pre-established harmony). For Foucault, literature in particular opens upon "the thought of the outside," and with it the dispersion or erosion of the subject, as well as of any chiasmatic interlinking of the visible and invisible. Rather than accepting a binary oppositional schema of inside and outside, or saying and seeing, however, Bourlez stresses the importance of understanding Merleau-Pontyan flesh as virtuality (and in no sense as positivity), as being in dehiscence, or as the "fold" where inside and outside turn around each other. Through his engagement with the work of Serra in which inside and outside remain in tension and undecidable along the lines of its curvatures and folds, Bourlez opens up another avenue of access, through contemporary artistic practice, to Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

Although **Stefan Kristensen** admits that the political dimension that Merleau-Ponty accords specifically to painting is left only implicit in "Eye and Mind," it demands to be explored both in its own right and in an effort to understand the visual work's capacity to challenge and resist totalitarian power. Kristensen argues that the philosopher gives priority to the dynamic and performative aspects of the painter's body in action; and he stresses that, in virtue of the indissociability of seeing and being seen, intersubjectivity is originary, and artistic meaning is formed in a context of sociality. This character of visual art is concretized, for Kristensen, in the work of two twentieth-century Brazilian artists (connected with the neo-concrete movement that asserted its Manifesto in 1959), Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. In the "spatialization" of his works and in their performative aspects, Oiticica not only involves the spectator in their bodily exploration and achieves "a fusion of color, structure, space, and time" (305), but he also explores the self's social and political visibility. Clark, in her late focus on the therapeutic "structuration of the self," through awakening the participants' bodily capacity for symbolization, enhanced not only their creativity but their very capacity for collective resistance which, Kristensen holds, depends on one's being able to enact the expressiveness of the lived body.

In an essay that concludes the volume, **Emmanuel Alloa** questions what could indeed be considered as a double unthought of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: the notion of the *virtual* and the art of *theater*, together with their interconnection.

Merleau-Ponty, who, as a reader of Bergson, tends not to differentiate virtuality and possibility, nonetheless rejects an opposition of the possible to the real, thinking it in terms of the self-differentiation of becoming which, in its bodily aspects, is permeated by virtualities, so that the virtual body exceeds the body's reality.

If a study of the theater seems conducive to thinking the co-belonging of the actual and the virtual, it also poses the vexed question of how to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of the actor's either actualizing an already pre-given role (as antecedently possible) or of engaging in a mere pretense of actuality. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the role played does not exist prior to its expressive actualizations. The actor's body, in dissociating itself from the actual in quest of virtuality, reveals that, in its appearance for the other, the human body is not trapped in self-identity.

Given both the close association of theater and the political dimension in ancient Greece, as well as Merleau-Ponty's tendency to think virtuality as immanence, Alloa suggests the political bearing of virtuality as a dissociation of subjects from their actual parameters and of a reconfiguration that de-figures "the resemblance of the identical to itself" (334).

Du sensible à l'oeuvre represents a remarkable piece of scholarship, as this rich and highly complex work does not constitute a heterogeneous collection but is rather interconnected throughout by issues or questions echoed and taken up differently, so that the individual contributions are enhanced by their conjunction. No doubt that the book will be an invaluable resource for both philosophers and artists engaged with the thought of Merleau-Ponty.

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