

'Art' in Nancy's 'First Philosophy': The Artwork and the Praxis of Sense Making

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Abstract

For the purposes of analytical clarity it is possible to distinguish two ways in which Nancy's ontology of sense appeals to art. First, he uses 'art' as a metaphorical operator to give features to his ontology (such as surprise and wonder); second, the practice of the contemporary arts instruct the terms of his ontological project because, in his view, this practice catches up with the fragmentation of existence and thus informs ontology about the structure of existence today. These two different roles—in which 'art' is both a general category able to stage the features of sense in general and a particularly striking example of the alteration sense undergoes in our times—make available for Nancy different perspectives on the question of sense. On the one hand, the general category of 'art' allows Nancy to construct a characterlogy of sense around terms such as surprise and novelty; on the other, the appeal to the fractal practice of the 'contemporary arts' supports the project of giving an account of sense.

This paper analyses the effects on Nancy's conception of sense of these different appeals to 'art' and the practice of the contemporary arts. Are the locales from which these different perspectives on sense take shape compatible? In what ways do they infect each other or, alternatively, undermine the perspectives of the other on the question of sense? Finally, what do these two strands tell us about what Nancy expects of 'art' and what would happen to his ontology of sense without the different appeals he makes to it?

Keywords

Nancy, ontology of sense, contemporary arts, art, social being

In the 1996 essay "Of Being Singular Plural," Jean-Luc Nancy defends his thinking as a 'first philosophy.' Against the contemporary climate of scepticism regarding the value of philosophy, he maintains and practices philosophy as a discourse that makes statements about 'what is' as such.¹ Indeed in claiming

¹ In this regard he may be compared to Alain Badiou who, in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, rejects the conventional wisdom under which 'philosophy' is stripped of its systematizing force. Despite

for it the status of a 'first philosophy,' Nancy asserts that his ontology is able to account for 'beings in general.'

I will argue here that this claim depends in crucial ways on his deployment of the category of 'art.' Nancy's ontology appeals to aesthetics in two distinct ways, which we might say in provisional terms map onto the distinction between 'art' and the 'practice of the contemporary arts.' In the first case, Nancy draws on 'art' as a metaphorical operator of the features of being. In this respect, it is 'art' as it is understood in the tradition of aesthetics that is drawn on in order to generate the features of being (such as surprise and coming-to-presence) that Nancy's ontology of sense attempts to describe. On the other hand, he appeals to the 'contemporary arts' because they instruct his ontology about the fragmentary form of existence today. In this respect, the practice of the contemporary arts provide a vivid example of the alteration the question of sense undergoes in our times and a stimulus therefore for the central question of Nancy's ontology, namely, how to describe the emergence of sense in a context of the historical thesis of the fragmentation of existential regimes of meaning.

In addition to his deployment of art in the ways described above, Nancy also makes critical remarks about the use of 'art' in philosophy as a category of 'referential ideality.' The different features and stakes of his references to the category of art makes it important, if only for the purposes of analytical clarity, to analyze the perspectives these different references bring to Nancy's ontology of sense. Aside from the clarification of Nancy's argumentative and rhetorical stratagems, the different ways in which 'art' or the practice of the contemporary arts play a role in this ontology also raises the important question of the status of this aesthetic resource for Nancy. What does he expect from the category of art? And what would his ontology be like without the appeals he makes to it? How, finally, are these appeals compatible with his criticisms of the use of art as a category of referential ideality? Before turning to examine

the fact that Badiou and Nancy are unusual in the current climate for the status they claim for philosophy, it is important to note that the figures associated with the modernist 'anti-philosophy' (which extends from Nietzsche to Derrida) that Badiou rejects are not a negative impetus for Nancy's 'first philosophy' but a crucial part of its explanatory framework. I will return to this point in the first part of my essay. See Alain Badiou's critique of the "'current" Heidegger' in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 47–53. See also Nancy's critique of Badiou's understanding of Heidegger and his analysis of points of commonality between Badiou and Heidegger in the essay "Philosophy without Conditions," in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 39–50, 45.

these questions in more detail. I would like to give a short account of the historico-ontological frame of Nancy's account of sense, which is the perspective I want to use to raise these questions about the place of art in the economy of his thinking.

1. Nancy's Ontology of Sense

The point of departure for Nancy's ontology is the absence of any compelling existential regime of meaning for existence. His philosophy acknowledges this by taking the question of ontology raised at the 'end' of Western metaphysics to be the 'question of social Being'.²¹ In terms of the structure he gives to this ontology and the terminology he uses to articulate it, Nancy draws on two different trajectories: on one side, there is his account of philosophy as articulating regimes of meaning and his view that the history of philosophy presents the exhaustion of all regimes of signification; on the other, there is his political-economic diagnosis of the impact of capitalism on social being. These two trajectories converge in Nancy's contrasting of History (as a system that gives a sense or direction to existence) and what he terms the 'historiality' of history.²² The passing of given or prior significations such as 'democracy', 'art for art's sake', or the 'total man'²⁴ in Western metaphysics and the disappropriating operations of the exchange system of global capital are taken by Nancy to expose the 'event-character'²³ or 'historiality' of history; the emergence into view of the contingency of the 'sense of the world'.²⁵ This opposition of historiality and History informs Nancy's discussion of works from the history of philosophy, which can be seen especially in his view that these works are structurally incomplete as concerns their meaning and direction.²⁶

Nancy's phrase the 'sense of the world' is used in the same way that one would have referred in earlier times to God or History to construct 'the meaning of life' or 'the sense of existence.' In fact, the quasi-historical typology he constructs of systems of sense leaves no doubt in this regard. According to him, there are three formal structures of sense, which are constitutively oriented to 1) observance of a pre-given all-encompassing order (i.e., the ancient philosophy); 2) salvation, (i.e., recovery from alienation, the Christian Fall, or

the expropriation of labor); and 3) existence with no guiding and justificatory foundation, but in accordance with an ethics of praxis of sense-making, which is an ethics of the sensibility or 'affectability' (the ability or 'aptitude' of the senses to be affected). In *The Sense of the World*, he states that "[t]he sensible or the aesthetic is the outside-of-itself through which and as which there is the relation to itself of a sense in general, or through which there is the *toward* of sense."²⁷ Nancy's thought grapples with the question that arises from this conception of the sensible, namely, how to locate the emergence of sense or meaning not from an interior or anterior origin but from the affectability of the senses to sensation. Although it is outside of the scope of this paper to treat the full complexity of Nancy's account of the contemporary importance of this question, it is important to note that according to Nancy's analysis it is the disappropriation of meaning taking place under the conditions of the capitalist economy that imposes this question in an inescapable fashion today.²⁸

His treatment of the topic of the excess of sense to an origin emphasizes that meaning begins when "Being does not identify itself as *such* (as *Being of the being*), but *shows itself* [se pose], *gives itself*, *occurs*, *dis-poses itself*... as its own singular plural *with*."²⁹ This thesis that Being is meaningful only as an element of communication or, maybe better stated, as arising with things taking place together, as their being-together and the meaningfulness of their being-together, is underscored in Nancy's writing by the emphasis given to prepositions. He uses prepositions to deconstruct certain representative approaches to ontology within the philosophical canon. As he characterizes them, these latter approaches attempt to appropriate the generativity of sense by confining the excess of sense to an origin. We can schematize the different modes of such appropriation in terms of the essence/appearance distinction. According to the parameters of this distinction, ontology is understood as going back to an origin; the origin or essence is understood as an enabling and determining condition for appearance. On the one hand, essence determines and enables appearances, but on the other, this determining and enabling condition is not given to the senses and needs ontological investigation to be disclosed. Against

²¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 129.

²² I treat the topic of Nancy's analysis of capital in *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Laoue-Labarthe and Nancy*, 143–49.

²³ "Of Being Singular Plural," 38; Nancy's italics. This description of depositing Being is described by him as an impetus to think that he shares with Badiou. Badiou, he argues, misinterprets Heidegger on the important topic of historiality. See his analysis of Badiou in "Philosophy without Conditions," 39–50.

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," in *Being Singular Plural*, 57.
²⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 77.
²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 77.
²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravitry of Thought*, 48.
²⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 24, 77.
²⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Philosophy without Conditions," 45.

the understanding of ontology implied in the essence/appearance distinction, which basically constructs appearance as a derivation, also seen as a deviation, from a point of origin, Nancy's ontology understands existence according to the ontological structure of 'co-appearing.' Traditional ontology neglects the shared nature of Being because it tries to think the meaning of Being singly and therefore apart from co-existence. But, Nancy suggests, this is an erroneous path because Being is first of all shared, or 'being-in-common.' By his reversal of the conventional order of ontological exposition, Nancy redefines 'Being' as acts in relation. Put simply, this ontology holds that things are neither indifferent to each other nor given to us by a design. Rather, the configuration of things happening together is, in Nancy's view, something like a work in progress. This idea may be described in aesthetic terms, as indeed Nancy does when he compares it to the structure of Kantian aesthetic judgment in which a truth is postulated "that is not given [*donnée*],"¹⁰ but his exposition of this precept pivots specifically on the idea that the opening of meaning as acts in relation follows from what he terms the 'structural finitude' of meaning.¹¹ Finitude acts retrospectively to open up what is 'given' to us in History as fulfilled meaning but also prevents any new meaning from saturating the structural un-giveness, necessary incompleteness, or finitude of meaning.¹² It is in this sense that Nancy contests Badiou's view that deconstruction is an operation complicit in the exhaustion of philosophy; Nancy emphasizes instead the fundamental questioning or opening in meaning that is won for thought once the pretense of a fulfilled, final, or saturated meaning is itself shown to be exhausted.¹³

In this context, the 'co' of co-appearing underscores Nancy's point that meaning is not appropriable because, as in the Derridean conception of *différance*, it belongs to the spacing of Being that 'remains between us.'¹⁴ Meaning, which has its location in the 'between' and the 'with,' which Nancy uses to point to the shared dimension of Being, cannot be an essence, an origin, or pure presence; rather, meaning begins when Being stages itself "as its own singular plural *with*."¹⁵ The 'co,' like the 'between' and the 'with,' marks

¹⁰ "Philosophy without Conditions," 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² See Nancy's discussion of these points in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹³ "Philosophy without Conditions," 43.

¹⁴ "Of Being Singular Plural," 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38; Nancy's italics.

the ordinary duplication of Being according to which it is meaningful only as an element of communication or happening in common.

The attempt to redefine the 'origin' of sense not as 'being-within or being-elsewhere' nor as an 'essence, principle, origin' but as the exterior surface of the network of 'co-appearing' is also ventured in Nancy's recasting of the interiority/exteriority distinction when he argues that Being is 'right at' [*à même*] the surface of the senses. He uses the phrase *à même* to define his new conception of the 'source' of sense as the affectability of the senses that occurs or is actualized 'right at' the point of contact between bodies, actualized not in the sense of the realization of a potential or essence but in the sense of a material or sensible event reconfiguring a given field of meaning.

In this respect Nancy may be understood as writing a 'first philosophy' because he pursues the task of fashioning an idiom that would, in the contemporary context of the waning of regimes of signification, enable a general perspective from which the emergence of sense as such may be described. In general terms, the contemporary arts are the crucial resource for the articulation of this ontology of sense as praxis of sense making, because they stage the emergence of sense or meaning not from an interior origin but from the affectability of the senses to sensation. Nancy's view that sense comes to presence at the surface of sensible bodies is indeed perfectly commensurate with the understanding of the arts as a 'sense making' that emerges from and at a material locus. As I indicated in my opening remarks, however, it is important to distinguish the different strands or orientations that inflect his appeals to the category of the arts and, thereby, to elucidate the consequences of these different orientations for the articulation and defense of his project of ontology of sense. This task is particularly pressing when we consider that it is precisely the conception of art in modern philosophical aesthetics as the material form that bears ideas and thus performs the role of 'referential ideality' that Nancy, at the same time as he relies on the category of art to articulate his conception of sense, rejects.

2. 'Art' as Metaphorical Operator for Being

The key problem of Nancy's philosophy is to generate an idiom able to describe the features of Being as co-presence. Nancy's ontology of sense relies on 'art' as the idiom in which these features may be identified and described. Nancy, we might say, defines art in a particular way in order to use it to do philosophy under the conditions that the absence of global regimes of meaning has

engendered. The specific features of art that he uses for this purpose are the presentation of the genesis of meaning and the ability of art to thereby revive the forgotten compartment of wonder. This perspective on art is developed along two axes in Nancy's work: on one axis there are the passages in which Nancy defines art in such a way that it carries the features necessary to do philosophy today; along the other are his statements regarding general ontology, which he builds up and defends by a systematic use of the features he defines along the first axis as those of the 'artwork.' In art, according to Nancy, meaning is clearly shown to be structurally finite, incomplete, or in progress. Moreover, these features are not just emphasized in Nancy's discussion of art, but they are also the features he chooses to foreground in his discussion of specific artworks. We can cite, for instance, his discussion in *Visitation (de la peinture chrétienne)* of Pontorno's painting *Visitation*. He states that this painting "does not bring to completion the representation of what it treats (and that is the prescription given by the tradition: that the representation remain incomplete)."¹⁶ This feature of incomplete meaning is intimately connected for Nancy to the strangeness or wonder of the experience of meaning when it is experienced as a coming to presence or genesis of presencing.

These features of the artwork are mobilized in Nancy's ontology as a framework from which to approach beings in general. This use of the arts positions them as the key metaphorical operator for his ontology; from this metaphorical register Nancy constructs a characteriology of sense around terms such as 'surprise' and 'wonder' and gives an exemplary form for the articulation of some of his quasi-historical precepts, such as the ungivenness or finitude of meaning (*sens*).

This use of the artwork to develop a characteriology of sense can also be seen in Nancy's criticisms of Heidegger. Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" lectures prefigure the focus on sense in Nancy's ontology, because Heidegger identifies, in the 'strangeness' of the work of the artwork, the presentation of a new relationship to beings that is beyond any present thing. The artwork puts in play the crucial transition from the familiar framework that asks 'what the being is' to the questioning attitude in the face of the bare fact 'that the being is' (*daß... ist*).¹⁷ Heidegger sees art as an exemplary way in which, beyond any

merely given thing, attention is drawn to how and that a thing is. Nancy, who understands the coming-to-sense in the artwork in terms of the presentation of the genesis of meaning (rather than truth, as Heidegger does), suggests, following Heidegger, that in art the forgotten origins of sense are presented as extraordinary.

Nancy criticizes Heidegger's description of the work of the artwork: although he reiterates the Heideggerian perspective on the arts as a disclosing, he argues that that which art discloses is not the 'that it is,' but the "plural touching of the singular origin."¹⁸ This criticism is significant because Nancy uses these features disclosed by the artwork to articulate a general ontology of being. The emphasis in Nancy's ontology lies not on a general 'givenness' or prior prevailing but on the dispersed, unexchangeable moments of the emergence of sense.¹⁹ This emphasis lends support to two further claims that Nancy makes against Heidegger: 1) that Heidegger's emphasis on the givenness of the thing diminishes the intimate relation between 'sense making' or praxis and affectability; 2) that Heidegger's thought is structured by a 'desire for the exception.' Nancy uses the features of the artwork that recommend it as a stage to perform the emergence of sense to deal with these shortcomings. It is in this critique of Heidegger that Nancy's use of 'art' to characterize sense is explicitly outlined and defended. Let me now examine these two aspects of Nancy's critique of Heidegger in more detail.

- 1) "Art" is the exemplary term of Nancy's ontology because he wishes to foreground the process of the 'making' rather than the givenness of the thing. The process of sense making is for him a question of the modalities of technique through which sense comes to presence.²⁰ Sense, insofar as it is posed as a question by art, thus becomes, at each moment of its posing—and in stark contrast to Heidegger—a question of technicity.²¹

¹⁶ "Of Being Singular Plural," 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰ This definition aims to straddle the classical opposition in philosophy of art between *poiesis* and reception in so far as praxis denotes affectability. Nancy describes figurative arts such as photography not in the vocabulary of images but in terms of offering 'an access' ("Of Being Singular Plural," 14; see also the "Weight of Thought," in *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997) and, for a discussion of 'offering,' the essay "Sublime Offering," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). This access is an access to sense through affectability.

²¹ *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 25–27.

¹⁶ See the translation of this essay in *The Ground of the Image*, 124. This passage is one that treats the painting in relation to Judaism. Nancy treats the same painting in relation to the three monotheisms and finds a similar 'interminability' or 'incompletion' in each.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 65.

And this, as perhaps Heidegger's deliberate ambiguity on the relation of art to technicity in his technology essay anticipates, implodes the category of the arts or, to put it more pointedly, the ability of 'art' as a single term to act as a counter-image to the technological.²² Nancy's complaint against the order of ontological exposition in Heidegger may be cited against Heidegger's admittedly ambivalent references to art at the end of his technology essay as the locus for the questioning of the technological. Nancy emphasizes the 'making' of the arts, for the same reason that he describes technology as praxis, which is to underscore the affectability of art and technics and also to indicate thus the locus and level of analysis of the significance of these for an ontological discourse. Alternatively, we may understand this position in relation to Nancy's critique of the Jena Romantics. The Romantic conception of the literary work as fashioning, in its productions, the sources of sensibility is criticized in Nancy's early work, co-authored with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute*.²³ It is precisely the Jena Romantics' conception of literature as an 'absolute,' as a fashioning or *poiesis* of sense, that Nancy's later works will describe as an attempt "to appropriate the generativity of sense" and to close down the question of *praxis* of sense making.²⁴ In his discussions of art,²⁵ the opening

²² Towards the end of his famous essay on technology Heidegger writes:

"Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it.

"Such a realm is art. But certainly only if reflection on art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are *questioning*" ("The Question Concerning Technology," 35). In this essay, as his modal endorsement of art in this passage indicates, Heidegger equivocates on the value of art as a locus from which to reflect on the dominance of technological relations of presentation. Nancy, whose own thought substitutes capital for the aporetic form of the technological *Gesell* in Heidegger, objects also to the tone in which technology could be construed as a fall from authentic existence and against which art could be, in Heidegger's words, a "saving power."

I have discussed the ambiguity concerning the critical role that can be ascribed to art in Heidegger in *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy*.

²³ On literature that is capable of engendering itself, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 91.

²⁴ *The Sense of the World*, 162. It would be interesting to compare the orientation of this critique of the Romantics with the analysis Helmuth Müller-Stewers gives of the genealogy and function of epigenesis at the turn of the nineteenth century. See his *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

²⁵ In such works as *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Atlantic Highlands, NJ:

the artwork provides for posing the question of praxis of sense making becomes a positive counter tradition to the Romantic conception, described in this early text, of the 'literary absolute.' What is important to stress here, however, is that as a consequence of this conception of praxis of sense, affectability is a feature not just of sense making in art but of sense making in general. Further it is this general reference to sense making that explains Nancy's aversion to the conception of 'art' as some exceptional space, from which an 'authentic' critique of degraded experience may be elaborated.

2) Nancy describes the "rudimentary ontological attestation" of the "with" in the terms used by Heidegger in the "Origin of the Work of Art" lectures, but he deploys this description for a critique of the "desire for the exception" which, in Heidegger, "presupposes disdain for the ordinary."²⁶ Nancy extends Heidegger's claim that the work of the artwork shows the ordinary to be exceptional to argue, on the basis of the "rudimentary ontological attestation" of the "with," that the ordinary "is always exceptional." The criticism Nancy makes of Heidegger concerns the double movement whereby Heidegger affirms that the meaning of Being must start from everydayness, but "then begin[s] by neglecting the general differentiation of the everyday, its constantly renewed rupture, its intimate discord, its polymorphy and its polyphony, its relief and its variety. A 'day' is not simply a unit for counting; it is the turning of the world—each time singular."²⁷ This critique of the Heideggerian "everyday" as "undifferentiated," "anonymous," and "statistical," and the call for the "rudimentary ontological attestation" of the *différence* at the origin of singularities, is clearly an extension of Heidegger's thesis concerning the work of the artwork in the "Origin" essay to 'everyday experience'—the latter now defined as "the exposing of the singularity according to which existence exists, irreducibly and primarily."²⁸ As an ontological attestation that concerns 'all beings' the features that Nancy identified first in the art work now extend everywhere: "'Nature' is also 'strange,' and we exist there; we exist *in* it in the mode of a constantly renewed singularity; whether the singularity of the diversity and disparity

Humanities Press, 1997), and *Sans commune mesure: image et texte dans l'art actuel* (Paris: Editions Leo Scheer, 2002).

²⁶ "Of Being Singular Plural," 9–11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

of our senses or that of the disconcerting profusion of nature's species or its various metamorphoses into 'technology.' Then again, we say 'strange,' 'odd,' 'curious,' 'disconcerting' about all of being.²⁹ The perspectives of Heidegger's artwork essay are thus taken up by Nancy for the purpose of a genetic accounting of the coming-to-presence, which is, on his view, a feature of beings in general. This thesis is primarily a claim about the (forgotten) origins of sense in general. Moreover, it is in this adaptation and generalization of Heidegger's artwork essay that Nancy's difficulties with Heidegger can be clearly seen. The artwork essay provides Nancy with an idiom for the description of being as being-with and thus allows him to extend the main elements of his critique of Heidegger's order of ontological exposition into a vocabulary able to stage and defend his own conception of being.³⁰

It is in this context, I think, that Nancy's comment in *The Ground of the Image* that "we call 'art'" by this name "without ever knowing what this word names" needs to be seen.³¹ What is called 'art' is defined by him in the general terms of his ontology as "the divided and shared out access to our common presence,"³² which is also to say that the word 'art' does not name a region of beings, but names the praxis of being as the taking place together of "the ordinary and the exception."³³

3. The Practice of the Contemporary Arts as Praxis of 'Sense Making'

In a recent interview with Peter Hallward, Nancy lists among the features of the contemporary situation of "economic, social and cultural mutation," the

²⁹ Ibid., 9–10.

³⁰ To dare a lot of the critical reception of Nancy's work has focused on his critique of the approach to the question of Being in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. It is true that this interpretation can call on considerable textual support, but I wish to focus here on a different issue: namely, to draw out the role of 'art' in the articulation and defense of Nancy's ontology. For critical treatments of Nancy's critique of the order of ontological exposition in Heidegger, see the essays by Howard Caygill, "The Shared World: Philosophy, Violence, Freedom," in *The Sense of Philosophy: On Jean-Luc Nancy*, ed. Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks, and Colin Thomas (London: Routledge, 1997) and François Raffoul, "The Logic of the With: On Nancy's *Être singulier pluriel*," in *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1999): 36–52.

³¹ *Ground of the Image*, 138.

³² Ibid., 125.

³³ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Our World! An Interview," 52.

phenomenon "of art grabbing ferociously at its own 'artisticness.'"³⁴ He explains the significance of the "immense unrest of art over the last fifty years," described by some as "art's 'crisis,'" in terms of "the need to remake forms for meaning."³⁵ In this account of the itinerary of his thinking, he describes the signal features of art in our age as "what was, for me, the most unexpected thing"³⁶ and gives to it the status of a force that impels and inflects his philosophical interest in the question of meaning. To my mind, these remarks need to be carefully distinguished from the way he defines art in the terms needed for his ontology. This difference is more than a change in tone. Rather, Nancy's references to what occurs in the contemporary arts have the status of an evidentiary framework. The contemporary arts testify, and also show Nancy how to respond, to the passing of regimes of meaning.

Nancy looks to the contemporary arts for an answer to the driving question of how existence in its nudity (stripped of all 'depth' significations) can sustain meaning. On Nancy's view, the arts are the exceptional category able to withstand the passing of metaphysics because the affectability of sense that takes place in contemporary art is "essentially fractal," by which he means that the experience of meaning to be had in contemporary art is not reliant on an existential regime of meaning. More than this, it is in contemporary art that, Nancy argues, persuasive testimony for the contingency of sense may be found.

Contemporary art lays bare, he writes, "the fragmentation that is happening to us and to 'art.'" ³⁷ Nancy distinguishes this fragmentation from the 'classical fragmentation' of romanticism. In romanticism the fragment 'is a form with finality. It "retracts its frayed and fragile borders back onto its own consciousness of being a fragment... [and] converts its finitude... into finish. In this finish, dispersion and fracturing absolutize their erratic contingency: they *absolve themselves* of their fractal character."³⁸ In romanticism the fragment has "all the autonomy, finish, and aura of the 'little work of art.'" Ultimately, it is only the 'little' size of the fragment that differentiates here between the art of the fragment and the art of the 'great' work.³⁹ In contrast, the 'fractality' of

³⁴ Ibid., 52.

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 124.

³⁸ Ibid., 124–25.

³⁹ Ibid., 125.

contemporary art deals not with a finished and complete ‘fragment’ but with the presentation of the excess of sense to a point of origin: it is the presentation of a “coming that no presence could ever finish.”⁴⁰ However, this excess is not due to, say, a transcendent potency in the work but exists because of the openness/exteriority of the senses and time, and the being-in-common of meaning. For this reason, the presentation in the contemporary arts of the fractality of sense also implodes the category of ‘art’ because the “birth to presence” staged in art “can neither be assumed nor subsumed in either the work, form, art (little or great), or any finish.”⁴¹ In other words, sense in the presentation of artwork is always provisional. This “always” points to a new attitude to the expectation of meaning and the kind of satisfaction this is supposed to procure. The contemporary arts are thus praised by Nancy for their spectacular staging of the question of sense. But because they also show that this question is *the* ontological question, the contemporary arts neither have an exclusive claim over it nor are they shielded from its implications. And this means that Nancy is critical of the idea that the arts ‘present’ the fractality of sense, because this construction is too close to the modern formulation of the arts as the material presentation of ideas. Such a construction obstructs from view the general thesis he wishes to make regarding the implications for sense-making of the evident breakdown of the coherence of the dualism of ideas and materiality. We might add that it is with the aim of avoiding this construction that Nancy’s paradoxical positioning of the arts as the exemplary resource for the staging of the question of sense that also undoes the integrity of the category of the arts can be understood.

Nancy’s discussion of particular works of contemporary art may be cited to illustrate some of the consequences of this complicated positioning of the praxis of the contemporary arts. In his discussion in *Visitation (de la peinture chrétienne)*, of Simon Hantai’s... *del Parto* for instance, Nancy situates this work along two distinct axes. On the one hand, Hantai’s work needs to be considered in terms of the fabric of historical references to the theme of visitation in Christian paintings, which it exposes to reinterpretation; on the other, the features of this work are significant as a staging of meaning as a praxis that occurs out of exterior relations and which the painting then, as a consequence of this praxis, inflects as a structural feature of the tradition of painting. For Nancy these points are intimately related to the process of the making of the work, which models the praxis of sense making. He describes the way that

Hantai folds and knots the canvases “before applying any paint.”⁴² This process of folding and knotting is close to the mode of Nancy’s own articulation of sense as a praxis, which describes sense as ‘knotted’ and which tries by means of this metaphor to privilege the network taking precedence over the nodes, or the coming of sense over the event of taking place. He writes of Hantai’s... *del Parto*:

It is a painting dedicated to painting, but less to any memory of its history... than to the repetition and the reengagement of an immemorial womb—or, if you like, of the womb of the immemorial, which thus turns out to be painting, its spread-out surface and its past, presented not exactly for the sake of a birth (not for the coming of a figure) but for the access that is opened to nothing other than the very opening of pictorial space. In being related thus to its own tradition, this pictorial space is related not to any ‘content’ (or signification), but only to its plane and its folds, manipulated in the interminable lifting up of a presence always already present in the ground, a presence of the ground itself, opening onto itself down to the most profound depth: being, in truth, nothing other than this separating and spreading apart.⁴³

In Hantai’s painting Nancy finds evidence of the contingency of sense that no longer resides in meaning-depth, but in exterior relations (“depth... being... nothing other than this separating and spreading apart”). Moreover, these relations ‘are’ the place in which sense is ‘made’ as a coming to presence (“the interminable lifting up of a presence”). Finally, this showing of the contingency of sense in the process of its making is one that can be seen to work historically backwards and forwards: meaning is an ongoing praxis but also one that perforates a ‘given’ History (in this case the theme of visitation in Christian painting which waits “for the coming of a figure”), not in terms of a content, but in terms of the place of meaning as an affectability to and praxis of sense making. It is worth emphasizing here the twofold nature of the praxis of sense that this painting opens up: on one side, it opens the history of painting to reinterpretation, but on the other, Nancy is interested in extracting from the specific tradition that the painting reworks general testimony regarding the source of sense today.

Similarly, he refers to Bill Viola’s video installation *The Greeting* as a restaging of the scene of visitation from ‘Christian’ painting⁴⁴ in which once again, we might add, the praxis of sense making is in the foreground. It is worth

⁴⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁴¹ Ibid., 127.

⁴² *The Ground of the Image*, 121.

⁴³ Ibid., 119–21; my emphasis.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 154 n. 2.

emphasizing here the special role art plays in the economy of Nancy's thought: the praxis of sense-making in the contemporary arts locates sense in relations of exteriority and thus provides an indispensable testimony to the implications of Nancy's thesis regarding the source of sense today, which is to say a testimony that the reflection on the deconstruction of sense in the history of Western philosophy is unable to provide. Nonetheless, it is clear that the testimony of contemporary painting has a historical effect that works in a fashion analogous to the deconstruction of meaning in the history of philosophy, as it is through the opening made by contemporary art like Hanraï's and Viola's that Nancy is able to redescribe 'Christian' painting as "an iridescent interior that, in the end, and in the beginning, is nothing but its own exposed surface," a point also phrased by him in terms of the "immense rising of depth into surface."⁴⁵ Finally, we may note that Nancy's discussion of contemporary art leads him away from any conception of the 'artwork' as a container of 'meaning' and towards a conception of the source of sense as sensible affectability. In this regard, we could cite Nancy's critique of Deleuze's description of the 'synesthesia of the senses' that occurs in Francis Bacon's painting. This critique is important because of the way that it phrases the implications of Nancy's use of the contemporary arts for a thesis regarding the place of meaning in the openness/exteriority of the senses. Nancy criticizes Deleuze's view, developed in the context of his discussion of Bacon, that it is "the painter's task to *make one see* a kind of original unity of the senses and to cause a multisensible Figure to appear visually."⁴⁶ He comments: "It will, however, be necessary to remark that the 'original unity of the senses' which is invoked in this manner proves to be but the singular 'unity' of a 'between' the sensuous domains, that 'existential communication' turns out to take place in the element of the outside-itself, of an ex-position of existence."⁴⁷

The significance of the contemporary arts as a resource for Nancy's ontology cannot be overstated. Neither of the two trajectories from which Nancy's philosophy develops—his reflection on Western philosophy and capital—are able to articulate or defend the conception of affectability it requires. But, at the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁶ *The Muses*, 23. Nancy quotes Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1994), 31; Deleuze's emphasis.

⁴⁷ *The Muses*, 23. Merleau-Ponty puts a similar point in the vocabulary of sensible schemas in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. His account is worth comparing to Nancy's both because of the emphasis he places on touch as well as on the making of sense (221). See also the discussion of the senses on p. 214, and the discussion of habit, pp. 142–47.

same time as the contemporary arts are the privileged category able to withstand the passing of metaphysics, this position also seems to require them to withstand the implosion of categories such as that of 'art,' and this despite the factors that qualify them as the special place in which the 'structural finitude' of meaning in History and, along with it, the 'end of art' itself is made apparent (as in Hanraï and Viola's work).

4. The Deconstruction of Art in Nancy's Ontology

As I argued above, it is possible to identify two different perspectives in Nancy's references to art. In one mode, art is understood in ontological terms. In the other, the accent is on art's performative qualities. In this category the fragmentation of art is mentioned to corroborate the new mode of experiencing meaning. One of the crucial features of this perspective is that it shows that 'art' (along with the other categories that had been available to orientate meaning) is 'dead.' Nancy qualifies this thesis when he describes the contemporary arts as suspended in the gesture of their own ending. Contemporary art practice is divided between two types of gestures: one that claims the status of the 'great' or 'little' work and those that continue to "destroy, reduce, and shatter art." He writes: "Moreover, the two gestures are not contradictory and much seems to suggest that it is possible to say that art petrifies and fractures itself in the pose of its own end."⁴⁸ This view is formalized in Nancy's writing by the joining of classical philosophical oppositions in the description of the artwork: the artwork is "a fractal essence,"⁴⁹ "trans-immanence,"⁵⁰ "[t]he infinite explosion of the finite,"⁵¹ or an "in-finite finishing."⁵²

It is significant that Nancy looks to the contemporary arts as a source able to instruct him about meaning today. This source presents for him the negative thesis regarding the 'death of art' in the form of the ongoing 'pose of its own end.' But the way Nancy describes contemporary art practice also instructs the positive project of elaborating the terms of his ontology of sense. The contemporary arts are a relational praxis that places meaning 'right at' the points

⁴⁸ *The Sense of the World*, 126–27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁰ *The Muses*, 87.

⁵¹ *The Sense of the World*, 132.

⁵² *The Muses*, 87. Art is "a completion that limits itself to what it is, but that, to achieve that very thing, opens the possibility of another completion" (*The Muses*, 87). In other words, art is the paradox of a complete perfection that is structurally 'incomplete.'

of contact between sensuous constellations rather than 'in' any transcendent potency of the work.

The implications of this way of consulting the practices of contemporary art are substantially different from the implications that can be drawn from the way Nancy describes what art 'is' in order to enable the general perspective he needs to write his 'first philosophy'. The contemporary arts answer different questions and respond to a different set of concerns than those that motivate Nancy's use of 'art' as a general perspective, which must enable the key elements of his ontology. This difference could be described as the difference between historical and ontological perspectives on the question of meaning.

Before developing this point in further detail, I would like to position my characterisation of Nancy's ontology against some potential objections. It would be possible to argue that the distinction between 'art' as a general operator and the 'contemporary arts' as the praxis of sense-making, as I have used it here, distorts the aspiration of Nancy's ontology, which explicitly dispurses the notion of a general or essential being distinct from singular-plural happenings. Further, it could be objected that the presentation of art as a 'metaphorical operator' for Nancy's ontology, or of the contemporary arts as exemplary sites that testify to the precepts of his ontology, places art/the contemporary arts in an instrumental position and does so against Nancy's view that art is the way that being happens and that the contemporary arts are the incomplete and singular ways in which being happens historically. To be sure, such objections are close to the way Nancy chooses to present his ontology, especially because they insist on the way the arts 'are' being-singular-plural. However, the perspective I take here aims to provide a critical reflection on the role such aesthetic resources play in the conception and development of his ontology. Indeed, to affirm the coherence between being and the singular-plural happenings of the arts sidesteps the questions I have foregrounded here concerning the rhetorical resources needed to articulate and defend this 'first philosophy'. In particular, it is clear that the genetic account he wishes to give of sense as fractal coming-to-presence uses the contemporary arts as an exemplary site for the articulation of his ontology and it does so despite the fact that as a series of ontological claims regarding being he ultimately needs to argue that the very category of 'art' implodes in favour of 'being'. The quasi-historical framework he uses to explain the motivations and need for his ontology may also be cited in this regard. This framework inescapably places 'the arts/art' in the double position of a historical practice and a set of ontological features. As I endeavour to explain below, the tensions that arise from this split conception of 'the arts/art' as well as the way he ultimately resolves them are

explicable in terms of the differences between historical and ontological perspectives on the topic of meaning.

For the ontological perspective articulated in Nancy's 'first philosophy', 'art' is the resource for the description of the features of all beings. In this perspective Nancy defines 'art' in the general terms that permit him to use it for a characteristic of Being. More than this, Nancy depends on 'art' to articulate his characteristic of sense, because the starting point for his philosophy is the problem of conducting philosophy under conditions that the absence of global regimes of meaning has engendered. Without 'art' as it is used by Nancy to describe the general features of Being, it is doubtful that he would be able to generate the perspective necessary for a first philosophy, let alone defend the specific features of his ontology.

In contrast, the perspective Nancy draws on when he consults contemporary art practice is a quasi-historical one. This perspective can be described negatively in terms of the way that the contemporary arts show the passing of regimes of meaning. More positively, the contemporary arts apparently implement Nancy's view that surprising and new meanings emerge from the affectability of the senses to sensation. On both counts, the context that makes this account of art practice significant is a quasi-historical perspective on the question of meaning. The contemporary arts answer two crucial questions. How do we know that we live in an age in which regimes of meaning have been exhausted? And where do we look for the source of sense now there is no given meaning? In both cases they provide an evidentiary resource able to substantiate the quasi-historical diagnosis of meaning in Nancy's thought and his view that meaning today emerges from the affectability of the senses to sensation.

Although it is possible to describe the way these orientations make available distinct perspectives on the question of meaning, which work together to substantiate and elaborate the project of Nancy's first philosophy, if we consider their implications, it is clear that they are not compatible. For instance, the quasi-historical perspective of the contemporary arts has implications that concern the 'source' of meaning today. The contemporary arts do things that indicate for Nancy that sense is made, and not given, in relations of exteriority. The implication is that 'sense' is not 'in' works of art. Rather, these works show the conditions of sense as praxis of sense making, and it is this showing that places 'contemporary art' within the network of sense that Nancy privileges over any 'node' of sense such as the very category of art.

The paradox here is explicable in relation to the quasi-historical account of sense in Nancy's ontology: contemporary art practice shows features of sense

that are not only not peculiar to 'art' but are indeed the conditions for its own dissolution as a category. In this respect, Nancy wants to emphasize the way that the contemporary arts undermine the status of art as a category of referential ideality. He is explicit that 'art' should not be relied on "for the 'coming' . . . of another sense."⁵³ In *The Sense of the World and Being Singular Plural*, he emphasizes the *aesthetic* dimension of the arts as loci of affectability and occasionally follows up on this point by including in the category of 'the arts,' so-called 'minor arts' such as taste and smell.⁵⁴ In *The Muses* the pluralization of the arts toward minor arts becomes part of a critique of the view of 'art' as a stable, continuous "region or domain . . . to which one could address oneself, to which one could address demands, orders, or prayers."⁵⁵ Nancy's criticisms of 'art' in this work need to be seen from the perspective of his attempt to sustain sense as a question. He thinks that the question of sense points to the exigency of figuration. Moreover, it is because the 'referential ideality' of an authentic term or origin misunderstands the very problem of the withdrawal of sense that the exigency of figuration also, or especially, means that no particular kinds of figures can be consecrated above others:

How are we to let it be *seen* that meaning exposes itself as impenetrable, and exposes us to this density? With what figure? By definition—that is, by the absencing of the ending [*fontion*] there will not be only one. By right, any figure is already such an exposure. This is why 'art' can no longer suffice for us, if 'art' signifies a privileging of chosen, sublated, sublime, exquisite figures. For meaning has, on the contrary, no chosen or privileged ones, no heroes or saints; and it is rather a formidable density of *common destiny* that is brought to light, to our light, the entire weight of a community of equals that does not come from a measure, but from the incommensurable opacity of meaning, which is the meaning of all and of each (and of no one). We need an art—if it is an 'art'—of thickness, of gravity. We need figures that weigh upon the bottom rather than extracting themselves from it. We need a thought that would be like a mass out of time; the fall and the creation of a world.⁵⁶

It is worth carefully noting the points of contrast between this criticism of 'art' as a category of referential ideality and Nancy's ontological use of art. In this latter case, too, the category of 'art' has its semantic unity perforated. However,

⁵³ *The Sense of the World*, 127.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁵ *The Muses*, 86.

⁵⁶ *The Gravity of Thought*, 84. The French edition of this text, *L'oubli de la philoophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), includes photos taken by Nancy of someone identified only as 'Georges.' The English edition, published under the title *The Gravity of Thought*, collects the text without the photos with a translation of Nancy's polemical text: "The Forgetting of Philosophy."

the path that this takes has different consequences from the evidence he takes from contemporary art practice of the dissolution of 'art' as a framework of comprehensibility for criticism. From the perspective of his ontology, Nancy depends on the features of art to characterize sense. So in this case the semantic integrity of 'art' is not so much dissolved as it is turned into a centrifugal force able to capture the features of sense in general. Indeed despite Nancy's comments on the passing of 'art,' it is clear that his ontology does depend on a specifically historical understanding of 'art' to generate as features of being the 'incompletion' or 'structural finitude,' and the 'wonder' and 'surprise,' of meaning.

Nancy himself addresses the different consequences and orientations involved in these perspectives on art in terms of the historical effects of deconstruction. Just as their genetic role in disclosing sense as coming-to-presence means that the arts, plural, disclose a general ontology rather than properties peculiar to 'art,' it also means that the arts are 'touched' by the ontology they disclose. The history of art becomes doubled in much the same way as Nancy describes the effect on the history of philosophy of the moment, when with Nietzsche it describes itself as the history of metaphysics. Nancy argues that the opening that commences with Nietzsche's account of nihilism also transforms the history of art into "history in a radical sense, that is, not progress but passage, succession, appearance, disappearance, event."⁵⁷ The meaning that is attached to art in our time as a degradation or loss of an earlier sublime practice is thus contested by Nancy, who insists that art cannot be measured by a 'common standard.' "Art," like, we might add, any other "region" of being, "can no longer be understood or received according to the schemas that once belonged to it."⁵⁸ Art takes on the nominal features of Nancy's ontology of 'being-singular-plural'; it is pluralized each time as a singular event in which the genesis of sense is presented.⁵⁹

Is this account successful in bridging the different perspectives on art used in Nancy's ontology? It is clear that Nancy needs to keep both of these

⁵⁷ *The Muses*, 87.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁹ See Nancy's essay in *Sans commune mesure: image et texte dans l'art actuel* (Paris: Editions Leo Scheer, 2002); and the following quote from *The Muses*: "... each time it offers perfection, completion. Not perfection as final goal and term toward which one advances, but the perfection that has to do with the coming and the presentation of a single thing inasmuch as it is formed, inasmuch as it is completely conformed to its being, in its *entelechy*, to use a term from Aristotle that means 'a being completed in its end, perfect.' Thus it is a perfection that is always *in progress*, but which admits no progression from one *entelechy* to another" (87).

perspectives on art in order to articulate and defend his ontology. However, the compatibility he constructs for these perspectives by means of a *Verwindung*, or deconstruction of the category of art, risks obscuring the pressing issue of what these different emphases say about his ontology and its rhetorical resources. There is, I think, a conceptual knot at the core of Nancy's ontology that his different references to art elucidate. According to Nancy's analysis the term *art* is suspect, not least because it asserts the existence of a node of Being with a homogeneous, static, interior meaning and significance. But Nancy needs to keep using this term. The use he makes of it for his characterization of sense, moreover, deploys a specific historical understanding of the features of art that, according to the terms of his own ontology, holds on to an essence of 'art.' Or, in other words, continues to use it as a meaningful unit able to be referred to in generic terms.

Nancy's description of art in the terms of the hyphenated coupling of metaphysical oppositions ('trans-immanence,' or 'in-finite finishing') is a practice of deconstruction that works with the constraints of history and does so by intervening in the way a word such as 'art' has been used. Nonetheless, it is striking that in his criticism of Badiou's characterization of deconstruction as a nihilistic practice, the features Nancy elsewhere uses to describe art are the same ones he uses to describe the import of the historical thesis of 'the exhaustion of metaphysics':

What is exhausted in this conception is the notion of *carrying through to an end* [la *mencée à terme*]. Whether the end [*le terme*] be called presence, subject, supreme being or total humanity, it is the capacity for having and absorbing a *terminus ad quem* which is exhausted. It is thus, very precisely, the very idea of exhaustion in a final term, or *teleology*, which is exhausted. For it is this exhaustion (fulfilment, maturity) which philosophy, having remodelled the anamnestic movement of Platonic u-topia or ec-topia in conformity with the Christian notion of salvation, had constituted as History.⁶⁰

Exhaustion is less a nihilistic surrender to historicism, as Badiou would have it, than it is the opening of "possibilities, requirements and potentialities which are not so much initial (in the sense of a reopening or reinscription of Plato, Paul or Augustine) as anterior to the beginnings themselves, buried beneath them, and in that sense still latent."⁶¹ Nancy goes on to stress that what deconstruction does

is at once to undermine (rather than destroy) the edifice of philosophical (or metaphysical) tradition and the historical auto-positioning of that tradition. What has been erected, on the basis of which beginnings, and how did these beginnings come to characterize themselves as such? Or again, and perhaps (as I hope to show) above all, what provenance can we ascribe to these beginnings? In the final analysis (and although neither Heidegger nor Derrida ever explicitly say so), perhaps 'deconstruction' simply means this: from now on, philosophy cannot be absolved from the question of its own historicity. And this applies not only to the sense of its internal historicity, but also to that of its external provenance. (This is why it can only be a matter of edges, extremities, ends or bounds of philosophy, obviously without this amounting either to an accomplishment or a cessation.)⁶²

According to Nancy there is a special set of historical circumstances that prevail today, and it is the experience of these circumstances that allows the category of sense to emerge into view for the first time and in its generality. To this general point, we might add that it is 'art' that provides the occasion and vantage point that allows sense to emerge as a question able to interrogate the dualism of ideas and material forms. And it is also this aesthetic resource that characterizes the perspective of deconstruction toward historical institutions and forces as a pulse that opens them to new senses.

Nancy uses 'art' to construct an idiom able to talk about beings in general. Alternatively, it is the practices of the 'contemporary arts' that stage the core precepts of his ontology of sense as that which exists 'art' exterior relations (rather than 'in' a transcendent potency of the work). At the same time that 'art' and 'the contemporary arts' function as stable terms for the purpose of staging the question of where to look for the emergence of sense in a historical context in which regimes of signification have lost their hold, in each case the semantic integrity of the concept of 'art' is itself undone by the questioning it stages. The tension is significant between the role art is called on to play, on the one hand, of articulating the emergence of sense in relations of affectability and, on the other, of serving as the idiom for the elucidation of a general ontology, precisely because of the unique status of the arts/art in the economy of Nancy's 'first philosophy.' Unlike philosophy, art presents how sense emerges from relations of affectability. In this context the important position Nancy's ontology determines for the arts is instructive for the perspective he develops on the historical ontology of systems of sense now that compelling existential regimes of meaning are shown to have lost their hold. This ontology necessarily twists the 'meaning' of 'art' away from the features that schematizes its place in traditional metaphysics as the material bearers of

⁶⁰ "Philosophy without Conditions," 42.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 44.

ideas and toward the knotting of sense from material relations alone. In doing so, however, Nancy uses the qualities of modern art to conceive of a universal characterization of the sense of being.

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"A Past Which Has Never Been Present": Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal

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Abstract

Merleau-Ponty's reference to "a past which has never been present" at the end of "*Le sentir*" challenges the typical framework of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, with its primacy of perception and bodily field of presence. In light of this "original past," I propose a re-reading of the prepersonal as ground of perception that precedes the dichotomies of subject-object and activity-passivity. Merleau-Ponty searches in the *Phenomenology* for language to describe this ground, borrowing from multiple registers (notably Bergson, but also Husserl). This "sensory life" is a coexistence of sensing and sensible—bodily and worldly—rhythms. Perception is, then, not a natural given, but a temporal process of synchronization between rhythms. By drawing on Bergson, this can be described as a process in which virtual life is actualized into perceiving subject and object perceived. Significantly, this process involves non-coincidence or delay whereby sensory life is always already past for perception.

Keywords

Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, past, prepersonal, perception

Dedicated to the Memory of Martin C. Dillon
At the end of the chapter entitled "*Le sentir* [Sense Experience]" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes:

Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been present.¹

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¹ "La réflexion ne saisit donc elle-même son sens plein que si elle mentionne le fonds irréfléchi qu'elle présuppose, dont elle profite, et qui constitue pour elle comme un passé originel, un passé