

Proximity Is Not the Opposite of Distance: Merleau-Ponty and Art Production

If the life of Maurice Merleau-Ponty had not come to a sudden and premature end in 1961, I wonder what the rest of it would have been like. His philosophical project was still in its infancy—what ended up being his final book *The Visible and the Invisible* [SLIDE] was in drafts and fragments, with numerous unwritten sections planned, and so he clearly had much more writing to do. But, in addition to his philosophical writing, I am inclined to wonder if he would have become compelled to develop a creative practice of some kind. Admittedly, his philosophical writing certainly cannot be said to be un-creative. Philosophical inquiry, is of course by nature, creative, and it appears that Merleau-Ponty approached writing with a full understanding of the evocative power of language, creating gorgeous and peculiar descriptions and turns of phrase in his prose. In line with his philosophy, he clearly thought of his written words and his ideas as irreconcilably interwoven, and reading his writings, especially the unfinished essays and notes, often has the haunting and elating quality of reading poetry. However, I cannot help but wonder if, as his age progressed, he would have wanted to take his philosophical positions to what perhaps are their logical continuation, and to have stopped writing and begun making

things that do not speak with language—paintings, songs, sculptures? Or, maybe he never would have stopped writing, but, would have developed an additional visual practice. Perhaps he would have begun a habit of writing until lunch, and after eating and a short nap, occupied himself in the afternoons with arranging, altering, and adorning various objects to make sculptures. Having finally elaborated his theory of the expressive power of objects, he becomes a manipulator of this power—a mahogany chair, on its back, on a triangle of green plush carpet, next to a green acrylic fingernail, and 3 bottle caps, a red painted cube with one mirrored side, a spool of thread, some sticks... Like Jessica Stockholders—this one: **[SLIDE]** Carpet, metal coffee table, four butterfly lamps, chandelier, various green plastic things, aluminum/tar flashing, oil and acrylic paint, green extension cord...

Of course, this is my fantasy of Merleau-Ponty's unrealized later life, and I dwell on it for two reasons. First, no philosophical text has been more influential on my commitment to interdisciplinary study than the work of Merleau-Ponty, and as such I like to imagine that he would have been similarly provoked by his own ideas. Second, although I often wonder whether I am in some way mistaken about this, it seems that world that I live in is not always able to make sense of this commitment to multiple practices.

I will elaborate on this second reason first by posing the questions: what if we lived in a world where there was not such a pervasive division between those who make art and those who write theory? What if it was common practice for an artist to make an exhibition and then write a philosophical text? Or for a philosopher to put her ideas into practice by making an image or object? What if both were considered art? Or both were considered philosophy? There are numerous artists who serve as exceptions to this division of labors, and with the rise of visual arts PhD programs and interdisciplinary fields such as Visual Studies and Performance Studies, the days of this separation as standard institutional practice might be numbered. In the mean time, I have been confused about where to study, or how to present what I do. With a few notable exceptions, I have trouble finding role models or career paths to follow. So it goes. I worry too much. I comfort myself by thinking about an 83 year-old Maurice in 1991 puttering about the rubble in his studio garage preparing for an exhibition at the Tate Modern.

Regarding the first reason for my fantasy of Merleau-Ponty the sculptor, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has inspired me and made it possible for me to conceive of academic writing, creative writing, art production, design, and curatorial activity as unique instances of a general principle that

governs speech, writing, seeing, feeling and making and thus has fortified my stubborn refusal to specialize in one practice only. I will divide my elaboration of this position into two smaller positions, one of which being the claim that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be read as an incitement to engage in creative labor, and the other being that his philosophy not only incites one to create, but also elaborates how this creative work can be understood as not fundamentally distinct from philosophical writing.

[SLIDE] Artists have been engaged with Merleau-Ponty's work primarily through the lens of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, which was of interest to Minimalists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris,¹ and art historians writing on Minimalism such as Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Amelia Jones, Alex Potts, and James Meyer. Merleau-Ponty's work has also been engaged in regard to art in reference to his two essays that discuss painting in depth, specifically the work of Paul Cézanne, in his essays *Cézanne's Doubt* and *Eye and Mind*. Though his explications in these texts are by no means distinct from his later work, for me, it is in the elaboration of his ideas in *The Visible and the Invisible* that the links between his

¹ Foster, Hal et al. "1969" *Art Since 1900: 1945 to the Present*. New York: Thames and Hudson. 2004. 495, 536, 672, 687.

theories and art production most saliently crystallize, and it is this text that I keep returning to in relation to both theory and practice.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explains how it is that some ideas are, in the most fundamental way, visual ideas, such that they “could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience.”² He uses the now famous example of Proust’s “little phrase” from *Swann’s Way*, in which Swann’s love for Odette is embodied in a musical phrase in such a way that the concept and the music are irreducibly intertwined. When Merleau-Ponty writes that “there is no vision without the screen”³ he is describing this type of sensible idea—a concept that cannot be grasped except through an embodied experience of it in the world. These are concepts that have no life other than a physical one, as it is experienced by an engaged viewer. In some sense, I would say that artists take this understanding of sensible ideas as given, for without it, the entire endeavor of visual creation would never move past the equations of metaphors. And indeed, I suspect that anyone who has been present in a beginning art class is familiar with a scenario in which a well-meaning student produces an elaborate piece of work in which each part of the composition is the visual

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968. 152

³ Ibid. 150

correlate to a concept (“the crows symbolize desperation, the pillow symbolizes motherhood...”) and the instructor or fellow students inform the student that art is capable of far more interesting and complex modes of visual discourse. Sensible ideas, for Merleau-Ponty, are not metaphorical, because metaphor maintains too great a degree of separation between the physical experience and its conceptual counterpart.

However, although artists seem quite aware that visual entities are not just embodied correlates to disembodied concepts, the detailed exegesis of how this might actually work is often left to the domains of philosophers and aestheticians. In Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, sensible ideas are the product of the inseparable relation of what he calls the visible and the invisible, **[SLIDE]** in which the visible refers to the perceivable object, and the invisible refers to its conceptual “lining” or “depth.” He makes the distinction between the visible and the invisible only to unmake it—to show that for this type of sensible idea, the two are intertwined and not comprehensible independently. **[SLIDE]** However, this interrelationship of the visible and the invisible is not unique to phenomena in the external world. In Merleau-Ponty, we, also, manifest this same intertwined relationship between our body as perceivable object and our body as

perceiving subject. Merleau-Ponty describes the body as “a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them”,⁴ but then continues, a few sentences later, by remarking that in fact “one should not even say, as we did a moment ago, that the body is made up of two leaves.” Rather, “there are not two leaves or two layers; fundamentally it is neither thing seen only nor seer only, it is Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty is pushing up against the limits of language and inherited philosophical categories by making distinctions in order to unmake them, by invoking opposites in order to explain that it is mistaken to understand them as opposites at all. Because it is only as bodies that we can get to the ideas, which are themselves objects, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy describes a mode of experience in which distance cannot be thought of as the opposite of proximity. Our physical bodies and the physicality of the object separates us from the idea, only to bring us to it, in such a way that distance and proximity become equivalents.

For Merleau-Ponty, this scenario in which individuals embody the same intertwining of subjective and objective, invisible and visible,

⁴ Ibid. 137

⁵ Ibid. 137-138

components as objects in the world calls for the creation of a new term: the flesh. The flesh is Merleau-Ponty's term for the principle that governs the intertwining of these two intertwining, referenced in the essay title as the chiasm. [SLIDE] The flesh is not a thing, but the governing principle common to individuals and objects. It is the state of wavering between objective and subjective positions, the continual potential of reversibility from the one to the other and back again. He refers to the flesh as an element in order to make clear that the flesh is not a thing but a manner of operation that makes it possible for us to experience objects in the world as meaningful—to create a relationship of “mutual encroachment” between our sensible and objective body, and our body and objects in the world.

[SLIDE] “The thickness of the body,” he writes, “far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.”⁶

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy breeds an understanding of a relationship with objects as profoundly formative and ideologically powerful. Because we, as embodied creatures, possess an objectivity that resonates with the materiality of the perceivable world, it becomes difficult for us to conceive

⁶ Ibid. 135

of ourselves as autonomous or distinct from the world around us. If objects *are* ideas, then it is possible for objects and spaces to send powerful ideological messages to us when we perceive them. Merleau-Ponty touches on this potentially dangerous implication of his theory in his essay *Man and Adversity*, when he discusses the ideological power of physical infrastructures in the political landscape of his day, but, overall, he does not dwell on the possibility created by his theory for ideological violence that occurs on the level of embodied experience. He is not generally considered to be a philosopher of political violence, being more a phenomenologist of perception and intersubjectivity, and yet, I find in this theory an explication of the ways that objects and environments can exist for us with all the force of political ideologies. Why do certain buildings, or articles of clothing, or art works, or designed objects have a varying but very real capacity to make us believe things we did not believe before, or suddenly become critical of ideas or people in a way we were not before? **[SLIDE]** How is it that certain interactions with objects or spaces fray our ability to conceive of ourselves as ourselves, or have the power to make one feel impossible or invisible? For me, Merleau-Ponty's description of sensible ideas opens the door to answering these questions, and to embracing an understanding of power as a

material form. He articulates how it is that objects function not as mere objects, but as gateways to modes of seeing.

If this is the case, I cannot see any more viable an option than to make things. In his essay *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty remarks that when looking at a painting, he “would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at.” This is because he “does not see it as [he] would a thing,” in the way that people often conceive of things. Rather, “it is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see it*.”⁷ In other words, artworks, for Merleau-Ponty, engage the viewer into a mode of viewing, which have the potential to last past the finite instance of perception. If objects are ideas, how can we not embrace the opportunity to create our own ideas through the creation of objects? It is in this sense that I interpret Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as an incitement to make—sculptures, paintings, clothing, designed objects, exhibitions. If ideology operates on a material level, then the creation of counter-ideologies—counter sensible ideas—has significant reparative potential.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. 164

It is for this reason that the work of Merleau-Ponty has been an inspiration for my artistic production. In institutional contexts, which, as I mentioned, often necessitate that I assert and defend my dual-commitment to written and visual production, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy clarifies my resolve to remain between the two fields. Although, I could ask myself, if Merleau-Ponty's ideas have helped me to cement my dedication to artistic production, why not stop writing and leave it at that? No need to write until lunch—I could make things all day long into my ripe old age. This is a reasonable conclusion, and yet, I am inclined to refute it. Aside from the fact that it was the pursuit of theoretical and writing based inquiry that first brought me to this and many other formative texts, I turn, again, to Merleau-Ponty's work and find there an explication of our use of language that configures it as not fundamentally different from visual modes of perception and production, making it possible to see how these two registers may not be, in fact, as distinct as we often understand them to be in light of existing disciplinary boundaries.

Like vision, language is not, for Merleau-Ponty, distinct from thoughts, concepts, or feelings. Just as embodied experience brings us to the things via the “thickness” of our bodies and the materiality of the objects,

language is in a formative relationship with thought. When Merleau-Ponty writes, in *Interrogation and Intuition*, that [SLIDE] “language is a life, is our life and the life of things”,⁸ he is referring to the way that language, like perception, is “coextensive with the thinkable.”⁹ There are not the disembodied concepts that are then translated into words and expressed by a speaker. Rather, language “counts as an arm”¹⁰—it is a natural extension of our physical existence in the world and it pervades our perceptions, expressions, and understandings from the start. The very ideas that we would hope to express through language are formulated in and by this language, which is always an embodied language. Merleau-Ponty explains that in dialogue, for example, the act of speaking cannot be thought of as an act of translation from thought into words. Instead, speech and expression occur in a bundle with the very ideas they aim to express, changing and emerging in relation to their context. Seen in this way, spoken language becomes not altogether distinct from the other operations of perception and expression. The spoken word, the gestures of the body, the experience of the physical object all manifest themselves by existing simultaneously inside and outside the speaking perceiving individual.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968. 125

⁹ Ibid. 118

¹⁰ Ibid. 126

If Merleau-Ponty understands language in this embodied way, he does not view the written word as significantly different in kind from the spoken word. “The philosopher” he writes, “knows better than anyone that what is lived is lived-spoken”, and that the transition from speech to writing does not fundamentally alter its intertwined relationship with thought. And throughout, the distinctions between seeing and hearing, speaking and thinking, writing and making become, at least for me, confused in such a way that the separation between them feels at the least cumbersome and, at the most possibly meaningless. Once we start to conceive of speech as an extension of our embodiment, and of writing as an extension of this speech, does it become possible to think of writing as a sort of making? Would Merleau-Ponty have been able to defend an institutional structure that regards making and writing to be significantly distinct domains? It is in this spirit of questioning that I read the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty not only as an invitation to produce visual work, but to situate this work in a close relation to theoretical writing. While there exist real distinctions between the two practices, I suspect that they are not as different as we have often thought, being both embodied engagements with the material world.