

Merleau-Ponty and painting

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Abstract

This article takes as its point of departure the question whether, in an age when "artforms" such as multimedia "installations" – which combine visual motifs of all kinds with written texts – seem to be an adequate reflection of an overwhelmingly complex postmodern world, painting still has a right to exist as a distinct art. It is argued that this is indeed the case, and that the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty provides ample material to substantiate this claim. Briefly, this entails the latter's insight concerning the "perceptual dialogue" between painter and visible world, a dialogue which manifests itself in an evolving "style" – or a "coherent deformation" of visual norms – on the part of the painter. Significantly, this presupposes the ambiguity of the visible realm – an ambiguity that is appropriated in one direction or another by the painter's ongoing (equally visible) interpretation of the visually given world. The article concludes with a consideration of the work of a number of postmodern artists in the light of the guiding question, whether their art, as responses to a bewilderingly complex world, may be understood as the outcome of what Merleau-Ponty identifies as the "perceptual dialogue" between artist and world.

At the beginning of the 21st century, in a culture permeated by cinematographically and electronically produced and transmitted images, one may well wonder if, among the various artforms, painting has outlived its *raison d'être*. Dealing, as it does, with the visible, the realm of images, which it has in common with cinema, television, video-art and (especially digital) photography, have these cultural practices not finally made painting redundant? If one recalls the growth in so-called "installation art", which (in one of its embodiments) enlists a dialogue among images rendered in various media, on the one hand, and writing – poetic, philosophical, documentary – on the other,¹ then it seems that painting may, at best, play a kind of inter-artistic, perhaps

interdisciplinary role here, ultimately in the service of a specific discourse or conceptual schema.

At least a role of sorts would remain for painting, then, it may seem, even if it is tethered to currents of artistic development which are more authentically an expression of the present era. And if one may justifiably claim that the artistic ensemble known as "installation" serves conceptual or discursive purposes – in the sense of promoting a specific discourse, "language game" or identifiable set of power relations – this would resonate with Hegel's belief that art has to make way, at a certain point in its history, for "higher" forms of reason or spiritual development (Hegel 1979:10-11; Olivier 1998:7-12).

Would such a conclusion not give undue weight to what Merleau-Ponty (1964:65) refers to as "Hegelian monstrosities"? Would it not ignore the fact that each painter addresses, picks up, anew, the constantly self-renewing task of capturing in her or his art, their bodily perception of the world in such a manner that its artistic embodiment exceeds the bounds of other art forms, as well as of the "standard," "official" or banal ways of looking at the world at that time? And if the historically located, perceptual dialogue between artist and world is taken as one's point of departure in this way, would it not serve to rehabilitate all the arts, including that multimedia ensemble, installation art, from the suspicion that they are merely the playthings of an inexorable historical process that legislates on their coming and going, their adequacy and inadequacy? But why would this be the case? Would this perception-oriented approach not trivialize the meaning or potential significance of art by reducing the art-historically distinct visual styles or idioms of different artists to the banalities of their

personal lives – the everyday texture of petty jealousies, rivalries, personal weaknesses, and so on – which often seem irreconcilably different from the epochal insight of their artistic vision, crystallized on their canvasses?

These are questions not easily answered. The degree of persuasiveness of any answers to them would affect nothing less than the legitimacy of painting in contemporary society, not merely because of the Hegelian (or Marxist, for that matter) spectre of a kind of historical determinism, but also in the face of the not unrelated present dominance of technology as a cultural force. A good place to start seems to be Merleau-Ponty's focus on the "dialogue" that ensues from an artist's perception of the world. After all, if painting has legitimacy today, what it shares with the other visual arts is a "rootedness" in perception – not in the sense of a foundation, but dialectically (in a non-Hegelian sense, rather, as an open-ended reciprocity between perceiver and perceived), where it is ultimately impossible to say where perception ends and painting (or another art) begins.²

The issue of *ambiguity* and its relation to creativity provides an interesting angle of incidence regarding the question of the dialogical tension between history, art and the specificity of an artist's situation in and perception of the world. In *Signs* (1964) – specifically in the essay, "Indirect language and the voices of silence" (pp.39-83) – Merleau-Ponty points out (p.49) that what he calls "free perception", accords objects in the perceptual field simultaneity, heterogeneity and ambiguity regarding their size, instead of the "peaceful coexistence" that they enjoy when reduced to a homogeneous scale of sizes through the practice, in painting, of mapping them according to the convention of "perspective". Before constructing a "perspectival" representation of these objects, they vie with one another as rivals for the attention of the perceiver in one's "living perceptual field". I would argue that this insight conveys an acute sense of the function of perceptual ambiguity as a prerequisite for creative transformation³, or what Merleau-Ponty terms "coherent deformation" of the

perceived world in art or literature.⁴ Moreover, considering that culture is subject to ongoing structural-historical change, it follows that the "perceptual field" in contemporary society is (probably vastly) different from that of a century or more ago. (In fact, Jean Baudrillard, Richard Kearney and David Harvey – to mention but a few thinkers among the many who have contributed to an understanding of the present era, have shown persuasively how drastic this change has been.⁵)

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of "free perception" uncovers the fact that the perceived world is not prescriptive with regard to artistic or literary interpretation of it: the heterogeneous world of "free perception", in which things "jostle" for the perceiver's attention, is a fecund field of potentiality as far as bodily, artistic or literary appropriations or "coherent deformations" of it are concerned. Such "coherent deformation" amounts to "style"; referring to an observation by Malraux, Merleau-Ponty reminds us (p.54) that "perception already stylizes". Style appears recognizably in an artist's work – for instance in her or his paintings – when she or he combines the perceived elements of the world into a configuration in such a way that they show a consistent deviation from, or "variation of the norm" of perception and of comporting one's body in the world. It follows from this that such a thing as "complete expression" or presentation of the perceived world in art or literature is impossible – any artistic "system of equivalences" (p.54) or style is always a finite, historical appropriation of the multivalent, perceptually ambiguous world. Conversely, only a perceptually finite, historical being can have or develop a "style" in this sense, that is, is capable of creativity. Moreover, this is not the result of an artist's arbitrary imposition of certain visual or chromatic preferences on his or her canvases, for example, but the outcome of an ongoing *dialogue* or exchange – visually and otherwise – between the artist and the world, in the course of which the things in the perceived world "answer" the questions put to it by the artist. These "answers" are incorporated or expressed in his or her

works through an evolving style (Merleau-Ponty 1964:56; 1964a:167).

But what about the historical moment of an artist's perception? If an artist's style is tantamount to a "coherent deformation" of norms of perception and/or representation (or expression), surely her or his historical situation, unavoidably having as its point of departure historically specific, but changing perceptual and artistic norms, would contribute to (if not determine) the kind of style an artist is capable of developing? "The perception of classical painters", says Merleau-Ponty (1964:48), "already depended upon their culture, and our culture can still give form to our perception of the visible." Apart from here confirming the crucial role of the artist's historical situation for his or her art – which is rooted in a specific mode of perception – Merleau-Ponty is also making a far-reaching art-historical claim against Malraux, who claims that modern painting, in contrast to "classical painting", was a "return to subjectivity" (Merleau-Ponty 1964:47). What his emphasis on the perceptual dialogue between artist and world enables him to do, is to avoid the all too easy, plausible distinction between classical painting and modern painting in terms of representation as opposed to expression (the art of the return to the subject). Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues (p.48) that "no valuable painting has ever consisted in simply representing." Even Malraux remarked on the fact that the notion of modern painting as "creative expression" was more of a novelty to the public than to the artists concerned – the latter, in other words, have always known that in the art of every epoch there is a creative, transformational moment, and that so-called "classical painting", with its aim of representing the world according to certain canons of accuracy, was no exception.

What does Merleau-Ponty mean by saying that "our culture can still give form to our perception of the visible"? Is there any reason to suspect that it cannot? Such a conclusion seems to follow from Malraux's characterization of modern art as "a return to subjectivity", and hence as an art of "expression" that cannot, by implication, be understood as an art born

of the perceptual exchange or dialogue between artist and world. In opposition to Malraux, therefore, Merleau-Ponty believes that modern art (in fact, the art of every epoch), no less than classical art, issues from the perceptual relationship of the artist with the world. This relationship between the artist, the artwork and the world is inescapably contingent – even the secure space of perspective, itself an "invention" (rather than "a secret technique for imitating a reality given as such to all men"; 1964:50), is subject to contingency: "...when, giving in to his fortunate daemon, the great painter adds a new dimension to this world too sure of itself by making contingency vibrate within it". Foucault's (1994:3-16) illuminating analysis of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* is a wonderful uncovering of precisely this kind of inventive, contingent twist that a painter working within the convention of perspective is able to execute. In the case of *Las Meninas* it is both visible and invisible: the king and queen are "present" in the constructed space of the painting, visibly, as images in a mirror, and absent from it – albeit all the more powerfully present through this absence – as the implied subject(s) of the painting, occupying the space outside the canvas, which is also the space contingently occupied by every spectator looking at the painting since it was first painted. The effect of this realization on the spectator is a kind of vertigo induced by the thought of the sheer, ungraspable variety and otherness of the thousands of individuals who have looked at Velazquez's canvas through the centuries since its completion, contingently filling that indeterminate space created for her or him by the painter's inventive genius – an invention born of the perceptual relationship between the painter (Velazquez) and his world. *Las Meninas* therefore stands as a powerful reminder of the contingency of this relationship, which is fundamental to the never-ending change in sensibility which manifests itself in artworks themselves throughout history. Merleau-Ponty articulates the perceptual conditions of the possibility of such art-historical change where he says (1964:52):

Since perception itself is never complete, since our perspectives give us a world to express and think about which envelops and exceeds those perspectives, a world which announces itself in lightning signs as a spoken word or as an arabesque, why should the expression of the world be subjected to the prose of the senses or of the concept? It must be poetry; that is, it must completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen. Modern painting presents a problem completely different from that of the return to the individual: the problem of knowing how one can communicate without the help of a pre-established Nature which all men's senses open upon, the problem of knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own.

What about painting in the present era, often thought of as postmodern? Presumably, if – as many have argued (Cf. Kearney 1988; Harvey 1990; and Anderson 1996) - there is a perceivable, collective sensibility, pervasive in contemporary culture, that entitles one to distinguish it (as well as its artifacts) from the modern, then "postmodern" painting presents a problem related to, but not identical with, that of modern painting. This follows from what has been argued above concerning the contingency of the perceiving artist's historical situation. If, as Merleau-Ponty intimates, modern painting could no longer depend upon the assumption of a "pre-established Nature", neither can postmodern painting. But the cultural situation where this assumption can no longer operate has been exacerbated compared to the modern. Perhaps the most extreme and disconcerting formulation of this "postmodern" cultural condition has come from Jean Baudrillard. He gives one an indication of what is at stake where – in a way extending Merleau-Ponty's argument - he argues that, today, it no longer makes sense to think of an independently existing world which is somehow "represented" in language or art. The image, he says (1996:77), has passed through four successive phases: initially, it was taken as "reflecting" a "basic reality", then it was interpreted as "masking" or "perverting" this reality (think of the iconoclasm of the Reformation), followed by the suspicion

that it masked the "absence of a basic reality", until, finally, according to Baudrillard, it has reached the stage where "it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (p.77). In other words, in contemporary culture, the "simulacrum" in the guise of the image has taken the place of "reality". And what is crucial to grasp about the simulacrum is that it hides the "truth" that there is no "real" referent or world to which it bears a representational relationship.

Even if one finds it hard to accept Baudrillard's counter-intuitive assessment of postmodernity (I certainly do), it highlights a prominent feature of the cultural environment that contemporary people perceive on a daily basis, namely the ubiquity of images in all shapes, sizes and places. Richard Kearney's characterization of this cultural landscape, although apparently more sober, emphasizes the same feature (1988:1):

Everywhere we turn today we are surrounded by images. From the home, TV or video to the billboard advertisements, electioneering posters and neon signs which festoon the public street or motorway, our Western culture is becoming increasingly a Civilization of the Image. Even those areas of experience that some might like to think of as still 'unspoilt' are shot through with images. It is virtually impossible today to contemplate a so-called natural setting, without some consumerist media image lurking in the back of one's mind...Our inner unconscious has not been spared either. The psychic world is as colonized as the physical world by the whole image industry. Even the private world of sexual desire has been informed by the streamlined scenarios of TV soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*...

Hence, to return to the question of painting in a postmodern world: Surely, if Merleau-Ponty is right about painting being born of the perceptual bond between the painter and the world, the image-saturated world of today must somehow find its correlate (not necessarily as naturalistic representation) in contemporary painting, whether it is by way of negation, or by way of parodic exaggeration, critique, distortion or refraction of some kind. Paul Crowther's work provides some interesting answers in

this regard. He identifies Malcolm Morley as the key artist marking the transition from modern to postmodern art (Crowther 1993:187). In the case of Morley's *S.S. Amsterdam at Rotterdam* from the middle sixties, one witnesses how an artist is able to move beyond a modern idiom like abstract expressionism to a kind of representationalism (which is not a regression to former modes of representation, however). This painting further evinces a perceptual response to precisely the mass-produced images that confront one everywhere. The "super-realistic" work is based on an ordinary postcard, and it draws attention to this by incorporating the margin of the postcard into the painting. In other words, it insists conspicuously on the fact that, contrary to the myth of art's "high" or noble origins, it has its origin in a mass-(re)produced image.⁶ Crowther further informs one that the process by which Morley created the painting was itself quasi-mechanical, namely, having the image blown up into poster size, dividing it up into a grid of squares and then transcribing it in paint to a canvas one square at a time with the rest covered up. This is an instance of postmodern negation: "We have a framed picture offered in the 'big' format characteristic of 'high art', but whose status as high is subverted by the image's banal content" (Crowther 1993:187). Moreover, it instantiates a kind of Platonic copy of a copy (for a postcard is hardly the kind of original that possesses what Benjamin called the "aura" of a unique artwork). The fact that the painting was achieved by a kind of mechanical copying, instead of "the virtuoso fluency of the skilled hand" of the painter (p.188), is another moment of negation – of a traditional requirement on the part of the artist – which is here tantamount to saying that "authentic" painting can *only* occupy a position of negation towards a world in which mass-produced images and objects have taken the place of a nature that used to be regarded as being independent from human culture. As Crowther remarks (p.188), what makes this different from Duchamp's parodies in the form of "readymades", is the way in which the comparable critical dimension is virtually

"painted into the image".

Morley's later photograph-based work (around 1970) contributed to super-realism being displaced by neo-expressionism, for example his *School of Athens* (obviously photographically derived from Raphael's famous paragon of high art), in which the surface is "ruffled" by "broken brushstrokes" (Crowther 1993:189). Apart from introducing a sense of contingency into the well-known depiction of Plato and Aristotle surrounded by lesser figures through his disruptive treatment of it, Morley left a visible "mistake" in the "finished" work, thus highlighting its open-ended, contingent character yet again. Not only does the artist here assert his own (and by implication other artists) continued insertedness in a perceptual world where icons from the art-historical past can be subjected to perception within present, "postmodern" conditions, but he also provides a work that resists classification according to art-historical categories, in this way modelling the complexity of the postmodern world. In later works (e.g. *Day of the Locust*) Morley makes things even more complex. As Crowther (1993:189) points out, he intertwines or mixes up different stylistic categories (like expressionism and surrealism), on the one hand, while simultaneously fusing cataclysmic images of disintegrating "reality" with fictional ones, in this way leaving the spectator suspended between an illusion of real space and the surreal *topoi* of fantasy. At the same time, this serves to problematize the status of the image in postmodern culture.

This "depiction" of an indeterminate, uncertain world accords well with "the complexity and/or horrors of contemporary existence" (p.189), a state of affairs that painting, in this case, acknowledges as being unable to render clearly or coherently by means of image-configurations. The important point, as far as the question of the possibility of contemporary, perception-based painting is concerned, is that the very recognition of the impenetrable complexity of contemporary culture is here the outcome of the (breakdown of the) ongoing perceptual dialogue between painter and

world.

Another neo-expressionist artist whose work bears eloquent witness in this paradoxical way to painting's inability to "express" the "perceived" horrors or complexities of historical experience in the form of images on a canvas, is Anselm Kiefer. A case in point is his *Nigredo* (1984) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the title of which derives from an alchemical process believed to change base substances into noble ones. It resembles a scorched landscape (although one is never sure if it is supposed to be a landscape) of which the material textures as much as the colours suggest an environment burnt, destroyed, and urgently in need of redemption of some kind. The spectators' perception of what is expressed on this large canvas encounters there the outcome of the dialogical perceptual exchange between Kiefer and the post-holocaust, postmodern world. Crowther describes his work as follows (1993:190):

Kiefer...moves from large claustrophobic interiors that hint at unseen powers and violence, to devastated landscapes linked with symbols or inscriptions that allude more directly to catastrophe, and, in particular, the disasters of German history. In these works, the very overload of scale, catastrophic excess, and an insistence on the physical means of the medium itself, expressly thematizes [sic] painting's inadequacy in relation to life.

It is not essential, however, for postmodern art to combine a *critical* cultural, social or political moment with a perceptual basis in the contemporary world, to be able to qualify as representatively postmodern. Crowther's discussion (1993:202-206) of the work of Peter Suchin and Thérèse Oulton demonstrates that, in both cases, it is rooted in what one may describe, in terms similar to those favoured by Merleau-Ponty, "as a concrete achievement of the body's relation to the world" (p.205). More specifically, the evocative, allusive forms that seem to be in the process of emerging in their works – for instance in Oulton's *Counterfoil* of 1987 – seem to portend the imminent appearance or emergence into visibility of hitherto unimagined, but bodily

or perceptually accessible worlds.

What these artists' work shows is that, even in the context of an image-saturated world, where some artists, like Morley, respond critically to the perceived mass-produced images in their art, others, like Oulton, embody in the textures and colours of their paintings a more concrete relationship to the perceived world. "...in the final analysis", says Crowther in Merleau-Pontyan spirit (1993:206), "the individual always sees the world from a position which cannot be wholly colonized by the structures of broader social existence". As long as some of these individuals happen to be painters, the art of painting will evidently be alive and well.⁷

Notes

- 1 The "installation" *BLOEDLYN*, curated by Lien Botha at the Oudsthoorn National Arts Festival in 1999, is an exemplary instance of this artform. Botha enlisted the dialogical cooperation of ten visual artists and ten literary artists, who worked together in pairs – a writer with a visual artist in each case – by way of interpreting the single word or concept, namely "bloedlyn" (blood line). The fascinating result, remarkably representative of the concerns that are predominant around the turn of the century (such as complexity, contingency and power relations) is captured in the catalogue that accompanies the installation – in the photographs and written texts of the installation, as well as in the interpretive essay (Olivier 1999).
- 2 It is difficult to decide whether painting represents a unique artistic response to the world perceived by the artist; in other words, whether painting is an irreplaceable embodiment of the dialogue that has taken place between artist and world. It is not a question that can be exhaustively pursued here. Suffice it to say that, in the light of the following remark by Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and mind" (1964a:161), I believe that one could construct an argument asserting the uniqueness of painting as an artform: "With no other technique than what his [the painter's; B.O.] eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting, he persists in drawing from this world, with its din of history's glories and scandals, *canvases...*" The fact that Merleau-Ponty draws an explicit distinction between eyes and hands, indicates that the function of the painter's uniquely skilled *hands*, in conjunction with her or his vision, cannot be overlooked as an indispensable element in a specific painter's art and its development. This is not to deny that the same may be said of a photographer, or cinematographer, or a sculptor, but in each case the manipulatory (from *manus*, Latin for "hand") skill involved is different, attuned to the specific manipulatory requirements of the medium

involved in the artform in question. And arguably no two painters or sculptors "handle" their medium in an identical fashion.

3 Elsewhere (Olivier 1998a) I have explored the various implications of thinking about art in terms of transformation more extensively.

4 Even at the level of bodily comportment in the world, one notices, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964:54) – here commenting on Malraux's remark that a woman walking is not simply a "spectacle", but "an individual, sentimental, sexual expression" – that the signature, as it were, of such comportment, is already a "coherent deformation" or style to the degree that it embodies a "noticeable variation of the norm of walking, looking, touching, and speaking..." The woman walking is "...a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk or even in the simple shock of her heel on the ground..." In her novel, *A spy in the house of love*, Anaïs Nin provides perceptive confirmation of this bodily style of being in the world where she describes Sabina's manner of walking towards her lover's apartment in New York to meet him, having left her husband's protective, but also restrictive and subduing presence a little earlier (1974:38):

She now walked swiftly, directly, with a power and vigor to her hips. She walked with her whole foot flat on the ground as the latins and the negroes do...The ripples of her walk started from the pelvis and hips, a strong undulation like waves of muscles flowing from the feet to the knees, to the hips and back to the waist. She walked with her entire body as if to gain momentum for an event in which her entire body would participate.

5 Cf. Baudrillard 1996, Kearney 1988 and Harvey 1990 in this regard. One of the important elements that their respective accounts have in common, is an emphasis on the overwhelmingly image-saturated character of contemporary culture. Needless to say, this implies that, apart from being confronted with "things" or objects in the traditional sense, inhabitants of this culture are also, sometimes bewilderingly, confronted with images or "simulacra" (Baudrillard) which offer themselves, not as representations of objects, but as substitutes for objects which, in turn, seem to have retreated into the background or, worse, into obsolescence.

6 Crowther (1993:187) reminds one that Morley's work, while resembling pop art (e.g. Warhol's) in this respect, lacks its humour, hedonism or irony. Instead, its "internal resources" announce unmistakably that it is serious and critical.

7 In the course of writing this article I have been in a long-distance conversation with Andrea Hurst – an artist and philosopher – about my theme. One of her remarks in this regard was particularly interesting:

It seems to me that you can only really ask that question of whether painting still makes sense *vis-à-vis* other media, if you have a technocratic view of art – as a succession of novel techniques – or a progressivist understanding of history. Sure, painting may well have unfolded the extremes of its possibilities technically, and have nothing left to do in that arena, but it is only if painting is limited to this narrow understanding that the question of its legitimacy even arises. I agree with your Merleau-Pontyish answer, I think – at least the first part, but what exactly is the relevance of painting having a unique set of skills not shared by any other art? In a way, that seems to circle back to the danger of reducing painting to some kind of technique.

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