Art and Appearing: Reflections on the Missed Dialogue Between Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Seel

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Although Merleau-Ponty wrote three important essays that address art – “Cézanne’s Doubt” of 1945, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” of 1952, and “Eye and Mind,” written during the summer of 1960 – the aim of these works (which also mark the early, middle, and late periods of his thought) is not to elaborate an aesthetics conceived as a specific, and perhaps privileged, part of philosophy. Rather, these essays are integral to the development of the key concerns of Merleau-Ponty’s own trajectory of thought, from his early intensive engagement with Husserlian phenomenology that turned it into a philosophy of embodied and historically situated perceptual life to his philosophical dialogue with both Sartre and structuralist linguistics, and his new focus on institution, to his final quest for an ontology of flesh. While the very mandate of developing an ontology is indebted to Heidegger, the notion of “flesh” is almost antithetical to Heidegger’s ancient names for the being of beings, or to his effort to articulate it in, and necessarily against, a language that he finds to be (like Indo-European languages generally) complicit with metaphysics. Furthermore, whereas Heidegger rejected any aesthetics (as well as an ethics) claiming autonomy with respect to the question of being and regarded literary or art history and criticism as mere academic business if not just flatus vocis (Betrieb), Merleau-Ponty in contrast engages with these disciplines, particularly art history, in depth. Nonetheless, he is not developing an aesthetics or a philosophy of art, nor would he be willing to embed such a philosophy within what Martin Seel calls “a general aesthetics” that would cross out the separation of
“fine” (or even, as Heidegger specifies, “great”) art from the “merely” decorative or from the various modalities of culturally engendered sensuous attentiveness. His focus, moreover, is trained chiefly on the visual (especially painterly) and literary arts, while music and film, though evidently important to him, are rarely in explicit focus. Photography is not addressed as such; and surprisingly the same is true of dance.

To complicate the picture, his meditation on sensuous presencing or “appearing,” on visuality, expression, and the invisible of the visible is crucially informed by his working through the philosophical understanding of nature in the three lecture courses he presented at the Collège de France between 1958 and 1960, particularly by the second course on animality which, in the context of the “new biology” of the mid-twentieth century, addresses issues such as the embryology of behavior and of animal appearance, distinctive animal world formations found even among lowly invertebrates (Uexküll’s Umwelten), together with animal appearance and self-monstration in ritual or instinctive contexts. Animals, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, invent visibilities (ils inventent du visible). Given then that one cannot speak of Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics as being more than a kind of shorthand denominator for stages of a phenomenologically and ontologically focused trajectory of thought with complex philosophical and interdisciplinary ramifications (almost a via crucis), I cannot claim to do justice to it in the format of this presentation. I will, however, outline and comment on the thought structure of each of the three essays and will also indicate some possible points of dialogue with the aesthetics of Martin Seel.
“Cèzanne’s Doubt” is contemporaneous with *Phenomenology of Perception*; and Merleau-Ponty also addresses Cèzanne in that work’s chapter on “The Thing and the Natural World.” His concern there is to show that the intersensory unity of the thing in its “absolute reality” does not derive from an indefinite substrate underlying its qualities but lies rather in the thing’s “unique accent” or manner of existing (what he will later call its “style”), of which its qualities function as the “secondary expression. The point recalls Heidegger’s reflection, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” that to understand the thing as a substrate or *hypoikeimenon* renders it unfindable, while the very transformation of the notion of *hypoikeimenon* into that of a substrate (in keeping with the Latin translation of the Greek term as *substantia*) effaces any sense of its effort to articulate an awareness of being’s self-withdrawal in phenomenal presencing. I find Seel’s text somewhat problematic on this score, and perhaps not entirely self-consistent. Although he speaks of the “aesthetic object” as apprehended in “a simultaneous combination of appearances that defy description” (S, 52), he wants to keep hold of an *object* (whether thing or event) that underlies its appearances and cannot be equated with any of them. Thus he writes that “the ball is not an appearance; appearances *reveal* themselves on it” (S, 38). The object defined as the reclusive bearer of its qualities becomes unfindable in its singular self-identity; but one can learn from Merleau-Ponty that one is not forced to choose between either reducing the thing (or event) to its appearances or rendering it unfindable but needs instead to rethink the unity of its sensuous presencing.

In the last chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty critically addresses the Sartrean conception of radical freedom refractory to facticity or situation. He articulates instead his own conception of a freedom that “does not break its bonds
with the world.” In “Cézanne’s Doubt,” he complements this discussion by questioning the freedom of the artist who, though paradigmatically a free and sovereign creator, is exposed (often with heightened sensitivity) to the vicissitudes of his or her psycho-history and of life, as exemplified by Cézanne’s psychological lability and his persistent self-doubt. It is this issue of freedom that explains the essay’s abrupt and otherwise puzzling juxtaposition of Cézanne to Leonardo da Vinci whom Valéry (on whom Merleau-Ponty often draws) characterized as “a monster of pure freedom,” seemingly detached from life’s passions and interpersonal involvements. Yet, according to Freud’s study of Leonardo’s supposed childhood memory of a kite (a type of falcon, *un nibbio*) striking his mouth with its tail, he betrays his preoccupation with this emblem of his own psycho-history by the configuration of the Virgin’s cloak in *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (Paris: Louvre). Merleau-Ponty accepts Freud’s misinterpretation of the bird as a vulture and speculates as to the latter’s symbolic associations; but this error does not affect his basic point which is that an artist’s creative freedom is neither absolute spontaneity nor yet is curtailed by life circumstances. Instead, it gives a “figured sense” to the artist’s facticity, showing it forth as a general possibility of human existence.

Heidegger who (despite his friendship with Medard Boss) had little appreciation for psychoanalysis, and who considered the artist to be little more than “a self-annihilating passage” for the coming forth of a “great” work, does not take up the question of the creator’s freedom. Neither does Seel, which is more astonishing, given that he focuses refreshingly and importantly on innovative contemporary art whose creators often wrestled with their own demons (whereas Merleau-Ponty tends to confine his scope, in visual art, to European classical works and to the 19th and early 20th
One could wish that Seel would take the full measure of contemporary artistic creation by considering the relation of creative work to the life-configurations, and sometimes contingencies, from which it emerges.

Merleau-Ponty treats painting, in this essay, as “an operation of expression,” in which the sense of a work is neither antecedent to its creation (for instance, in the manner of an “author’s intention”) nor can be derived by retrospective interpretations of the artist’s life or art-historical situation. The work seeks rather to recapture (in difference rather than in identity) “the spontaneous order of things perceived” that underlies the order of human institutions. It draws on the ground of “inhuman nature” that subtends human projects, or else on “worlds at the threshold, similar for our perception to nature itself.” In this sense, Merleau-Ponty also characterizes nature as “a continual birth,” and painting as a proto-phenomenological “intuitive science.” These phrasings anticipate his later notion of “wild” or “brute” being (l’être brut ou sauvage), which Seel, in a cursory mention of Merleau-Ponty, assimilates to “formless reality” (S,145). Merleau-Ponty, however, does not speak of the formless (with Nietzschean and Schopenhauerian resonances), but rather of processes of appearing or taking form, of a coming-into-presences that involves an intersensory plenitude, and of the “lived thing” as a center from which sensory givens radiate (recalling here the thing’s non-objective unity).

One can certainly be critical (as I have often been) of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Cézanne and of his treatment of painting as a proto-phenomenological “secret science.” What stands out, however, in the context of considering the relation of his philosophy of art to Seel’s aesthetics, is his pervasive concern for a painterly interrogation of nature, whereas Seel maintains that “art works are objects that, by virtue
of their individual appearing, function as presentations of human relations” (S, 108). To seek to delve beneath “complex human conditions” (S, 111) appears to be, for him, tantamount to espousing the formless, whereas Merleau-Ponty seeks, in the painterly interrogation of appearing, to trace the bond of culture and constituted meaning (of what he will later call institution) to non-human nature with which humanity retains an inextricable kinship. Considering this contrast between Seel and Merleau-Ponty, one can certainly ask whether the art-historical traditions of studying non-human nature – from Chinese classical landscape painting to the Romantic focus on land-or seascape, or to the painterly study of plant and animal life (developed in China and Japan as well as Europe) remains focused essentially on the human condition or else reveals its interconnectedness with the intricate and autonomous complexities of nature. I find the second of these options to be compelling.

2

“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” is the reworked third chapter of *The Prose of the World*, which Merleau-Ponty never completed, and which was published posthumously in 1969. He prefaced the article by a reflection on Saussurean linguistics and used it as the lead article for the 1960 collection *Signs*. It is also thematically connected with the lecture courses on institution and passivity that Merleau-Ponty offered in 1954-1955; and a certain shift in emphasis from expression to institution becomes evident if one compares the original book chapter to the article. This work of Merleau-Ponty’s middle period is highly complex and involves some startling shifts in intellectual perspective. Since, moreover, its thematic does not significantly connect with the aesthetics of Martin Seel, I will limit myself to discussing a few select issues or points.
Whereas structuralism, which Merleau-Ponty was engaged with at the time, effaces the place of the subject, Malraux’s aesthetics, which also preoccupied him, charges post-classical painting with sheer subjectivism. Merleau-Ponty rejects this charge, arguing that the perceptual world exceeds every configuration that, in the history of art, works itself out as a style, and that there is no style that does not constitute a modality of contact with the world. Optimally, a given style becomes historically efficacious as a recognized modality of expression, thus exercising a power of initiation or institution and attesting to the carnal intercorporeity that, for Merleau-Ponty, displaces intersubjectivity. Surprisingly however, Merleau-Ponty, who claims that perception already stylizes and is primordially expressive, that all style is “a shaping of the elements of the world,” and further that modern painting brings one up against “a truth that does not resemble things,” goes on to reject abstract painting, which was gaining visibility in Paris at the time. He reduces it peremptorily to either hard edge geometrical or biomorphic abstraction (characterizing the latter as a preoccupation with “infusoria and microbes”). In marked contrast, Seel’s aesthetics (written, of course, a good half century later) not only gives paradigmatic status to a work by Barnett Newman and generally privileges innovative contemporary art, but also claims a certain primacy for abstraction. The self-referentiality characteristic of “pictures” is, he writes, already operative in non-figurative picture production, so that its figurative counterpart proves to be “an additional achievement” that expands the originary status of abstraction (S, 172). This view, which has the advantage of doing justice to the non-figurative character of at least part of so-called “primitive” art, constitutes a significant challenge to Merleau-Ponty’s granting
primacy to figuration (even though he both recognizes and celebrates the departure from classical figuration in the work of artists such as Klee, Giacometti, or Matisse).

Given Malraux’s problem of how to account for the unity of art that he perceived to be indicated by trans-cultural and trans-historical affinities between artefacts or works, and of doing so without invoking the agency of a quasi-Hegelian spirit, Merleau-Ponty turned to the supposedly unitary character of human embodiment in its sentience, motility, and expressiveness and to a consequent unity of human style. Both the notions of the unity of art and of human embodiment are problematic, the former because it disregards the fact that “art” is a Western concept often superimposed on works that were not created for pure aesthetic contemplation (but functioned in contexts such ritual, communication with the spirit world, power, or magic), and the latter because it exempts the body from gender, illness, ageing and decrepitude, or brutalization. The search for unity, which has no parallel in the thought of Seel, is in tension with the inherently differential character of expression which welcomes alterity.

Some thinkers in the history of aesthetics have tended to hierarchize the arts (without asking themselves Jean-Luc Nancy’s surprisingly difficult question: “Why are there Several Arts Rather than One?”). Whereas Hegel privileged the poetic word, and Schopenhauer (followed by the young Nietzsche) privileged music, Heidegger, who (in “The Origin of the Work of Art”) argues that the various arts are essentially modalities of poetic articulation (Dichtung), also seeks to establish a unity of art by his privileging of the poetic word. Merleau-Ponty tends to privilege painting as a direct visual interrogation of visuality; but in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” he subordinates “the mute forms of expression” to language. He claims that the arts of language “go much
further toward true creation” than painting (and by implication the wider spectrum of visual arts). Literature, he argues, preserves its past in ongoing transformations and does so in critical self-transparency, whereas painterly works supposedly contest each other in unstilled rivalry, with each new creation seeking to supersede the works of the past. Moreover, it lacks the self-transparency and self-referentiality of the arts of language, for “one does not paint painting, but [one] speaks about speech.”

This position deserves to be criticized, given that painters have always painted about painting and have generally done so in lucid (if not verbally articulated) self-transparency, to say nothing about the rich historical self-referentiality of classical Chinese painting. Fundamentally, it is the gesture of privileging and subordination that deserves to be criticized. Seel steers clear of this temptation in that he treats aesthetic perception or apprehension as attentiveness to processes and modalities of sensuous appearing which, he stresses, must retain complex forms of openness, among them openness to intersensory participation (so that no art is pure), as well as to conceptuality and reflection (so that no art is “mute”; S,88f). Art works are distinctive for him in being “constellational presentations” in the medium of appearing (S, 95). Drawing upon Valéry as well as Adorno, he stresses a constitutive indeterminacy in aesthetic appearing; and on this point his thought converges with Merleau-Ponty’s (who was also inspired by Valéry). Even the literary arts, Merleau-Ponty finds, cultivate certain tacit rather than explicit forms of expression, vesting signification in elisions, caesurae, or traces, and thus in the unsaid (which recalls Heidegger’s essential unsaid), so that they let truth come to pass by an expressive movement which “throws our image of the world out of focus.” Expression thus understood is, Merleau-Ponty finds, the mind’s “existence in act,” so
that, as he is constrained to admit, language and the literary arts can, in the end, claim only a relative privilege over the silent expressiveness of the visual arts (music is, regrettably, not taken up in this context).

3

“Eye and Mind,” written in the summer of 1960 at Le Tholonet, in the Provençal environment of Cézanne, was the last work Merleau-Ponty published before his sudden death in May, 1961. It is closely connected with his work on the manuscript of The Visible and the Invisible, left a fragment at his death, and chronologically as well as thematically in particular with Chapter Four of that work, “The Intertwining, the Chiasm.” It is also interconnected with Signs, in that Merleau-Ponty, having already completed the Introduction to that collection, returned to it after writing the essay and added a final section concerning his broken friendship with Sartre.

Of the six sections of “Eye and Mind,” the first echoes Heidegger’s confrontation of contemporary technicity as “the set-up that provokes” (das herausfordernde Ge-stell) by its totalizing reduction of all presencing to energy reserves at our disposal, with art as a possible saving power (das Rettende). Its saving consists in awakening a sense of the epochal un-concealment that encompasses technicity itself (i.e., in revealing it as a “destiny” or a sending of un-concealment). My reference here is to “The Question Concerning Technology” of 1954; but Heidegger re-affirmed the same structure of thought as late as the Athens Lecture of 1960. Merleau-Ponty’s own focus, however, is trained more on the methodology and discourses of the sciences than on technology (he had competence in both psychology and biology). He contrasts the “classical science” of
the seventeenth century (in particular Descartes’s) with contemporary science in that the former, for all its bold constructivism, maintained a sense of the opacity of the world. Although this opacity is metaphysical (for Descartes it meant the incomprehensibility of the soul’s embodiment and of the divine infinity), it has a certain correlation with Seel’s notion of indeterminacy. This correlation raises the interesting question (here put forward but not addressed) as to whether and how indeterminacy can fruitfully characterize both the aesthetic and the scientific modes of apprehending reality.

For Merleau-Ponty, it is now painting which can reconnect one with the world’s opacity, in that it explores and reveals “the fabric of raw being of which activism doesn’t want to know anything.” Once again, raw being is not the formless reality as which Seel characterizes it in his cursory remark on Merleau-Ponty. Rather, it is the originary sensory or sensuous and sense-fraught presencing of the world to which the painter, Merleau-Ponty now thinks, has privileged access because he or she (unlike the humblest student of philosophy) is not called upon to offer interpretations or to take a stand, as is expected of “the man who speaks.” She or he is released to abide in a silent visual exploration and contemplation of the sensory appearing or presencing of reality.

Although Merleau-Ponty’s late reiterated privileging of painting reverses his earlier stand in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” one might note that he was, at the time, profoundly taken with the work of the novelist Claude Simon. He initiated a correspondence with this writer and planned to offer a lecture course on his work. Had he lived to do so, it is entirely possible that he might have modified once again his understanding of the interrelation of literature and the visual arts.
In the second section of the essay (or short monograph), Merleau-Ponty focuses on the painter’s body in terms of the inter-involvement of sensory modalities and of the senses (particularly vision) and movement, and of the trans-substantiations taking place between body, world, and the painterly work. These lateral interrelations constitute a “system of exchanges” that effaces any sharp division between sensible or sensuous phenomena and the sentient body. Rather than revealing things from a detached vantage point, vision must already be prefigured in them, while the sentient body of her who sees is from the outset integral to the visible, or to the sensible/sentient fabric of the world. Merleau-Ponty, drawing on the reported sayings of Cézanne and on the diaries of Paul Klee, notes that painters have generally been aware of these interrelationships, which Seel however does not address; and here again the disjunction between him and Merleau-Ponty is fundamentally that Seel is working out an aesthetics, whereas Merleau-Ponty’s focus is ontological. Similarly Merleau-Ponty’s reflection on mirrors as thematized in painting, which concludes this section, shows them to be not only a self-inscription of the painter’s vision, but a figuration and amplification of the metaphysical structure of the body as flesh. As such, they draw sentience outside the body proper (in that one can virtually sense stimuli in one’s reflected body) and thus prefigure intercorporeity (which, for Merleau-Ponty, also means interanimality).

Reflecting on painterly creation, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “internal equivalent” that a given visual configuration evokes in the painter’s sentience (which, true to the Greek sense of aitshēsis, is not mere perception but also feeling and thus carries emotive, oneiric, and imaginal resonances) as a “carnal essence” which in turn motivates the creation of the painterly or graphic trace. He discusses carnal essences, in
the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, as idealities that cannot be disassociated from sensuousness and that thus constitute the indissoluble bond between idea and flesh. An exploration of these carnal essences might not only be congenial to Seel’s aesthetics but might enhance his critique of the contemporary tendency to divorce art entirely from sensuous appearing. At the level of the carnal essences (which are not limited to artistic creation or aesthetic apprehension but can be found in sensuous apprehension generally), the attempted divorce proves impossible to carry out.

I will here pass lightly over the third section devoted to Descartes’s mechanistic reconstruction of vision in terms of the physiological inscription of brain traces which the mind deciphers, in his *Optics* of 1637 (I have examined this text in detail, however, in both my *Vision’s Invisibles* and *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty*). One should note that Descartes takes care to present this model purely as a *modus concipiendi*, rather than as being true to nature. Merleau-Ponty notes that on such an understanding of vision, one that seeks to exorcise vision’s “specters,” painting becomes incapable of opening up any access to being. It is essentially understood in terms of drawing as perspectival projection for which space is homogeneous extension, “the in-itself *par excellence*.” Heidegger, incidentally, addresses the question of spatiality quite similarly in his 1969 essay, “Art and Space,” dedicated to the sculptor Eduardo Chillida. In the present context, what is interesting is that Descartes’s reconstruction of vision in some ways prefigures Danto’s view that visuality is irrelevant to the work of art – a view that Seel rejects and accuses of fallacy (S, 120). Although Descartes, given his historical situation, was not confronted with art objects perceptually indistinguishable from their everyday counterparts, such a Duchamp’s ready-mades or Warhol’s Brillo boxes, a comparative study of his banishing
of sensuousness from vision (he literally models it on the blind man’s touch) and of Danto’s view that (as cited by Seel) “visuality drops away, as little relevant to art as beauty proved to have been” (S, 119) could well prove intellectually fruitful. As to beauty, one might add that it has not been buried in the graveyard of aesthetics but still possesses vitality, as shown by the recent work of thinkers such as François Cheng and Galen Johnson. The challenge is to rethink it in a way that does not equate it with the agreeable but instead does justice to its compelling and unsettling power.

Merleau-Ponty, who speaks of a profound discordance that the experiences in the interrelations of man and being when confronting the universe of classical thought with the researches of modern painting, reflects in the fourth section that the work “opens up a field in which it inscribes its own metamorphoses”. The art work is possessed of a continual differential fecundity. If the modern or contemporary painter is still in quest of depth (la profondeur), this depth cannot be the prosaic spatial recession or the illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional surface. It is rather a “global locality” or voluminosity that allows for sensuous presencing and involves all the registers of visibility. Painting, he now admits, tends toward autofiguration and toward multiplying “systems of equivalences” while breaking their adherence to “the envelope of things.” He speaks of these equivalences as constituting “a logos of light, of relief, of masses,” or of “a conceptless presentation of universal being.” Once again, it is clear that “universal being” is highly articulated or self-articulating, rather than approaching Seel’s dismissive notion of “formless reality.” The effort of modern painting has not, he notes, expended itself on choosing between figuration or abstraction (which he refers to as the creation of “signs”); but rather, artists may choose to invent entirely new means of expression (one
thinks here of the video and installation works, or works that withdraw entirely from appearing such as Walter de Maria’s *Vertical Earth Kilometer*, discussed by Seel), or else they may reinvest the traditional registers of painterly and sculptural presencing, such as line, color, or the presentation of motion in media that are essentially static.

Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of these re-investments are, to be sure, open to certain criticisms. Color, for instance, can hardly be revealed adequately in its powers of visual constitution on the basis of the areas of blank gessoed (and thus white) canvas in certain of Cézanne’s paintings; and line did not have to wait for Klee to liberate it from prosaic delineation and restore to it its power to effract and activate space, and to “render visible.” What Merleau-Ponty’s analyses converge on, however, is an undercutting or deconstruction, by the art work, of traditional conceptual dichotomies, and an erosion of customary ontic assurances that allow art to function ultimately as a “dehiscence” or “deflagration” of being within sensuous presencing or, in Seel’s language, appearing. The metaphors indicate a differential proliferation and an outreach into the unforeseeable.

In continuation with this thought, Merleau-Ponty addresses the historicity of art in the brief fifth section. He now emphasizes that the work offers up a differential field within which every creation “confirms, exalts, recreates, or creates in advance all the others,” so that every aesthetic quest reconfigures the entire field. If meaning shows itself to be differential at its core, then the literary arts lack the privilege Merleau-Ponty accorded them in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence;” they cannot hope to appropriate their past in pure self-transparency.

While these reflections follow a different trajectory than Seel’s who is not concerned with the issue (foregrounded by Heidegger) of the historicity of art, I want to
point out, in conclusion, that Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of the complex “participations” of every visual quale that form part of chapter four of *The Visible and the Invisible* are particularly relevant to Seel’s thought, although their import, for Merleau-Ponty, is ontological rather than specifically aesthetic.

The discussion of the patch of red that opens the chapter dispels the illusion that it could be approached unproblematically as a self-contained sense datum. It is from the outset differentiated not only by the appearance of its materiality (is it woolly, metallic, or an atmospheric halo?) and by the interaction of color (the red does not appear in sheer isolation), but it is also invested with complex “participations” of personal or cultural memory, with the complexities of imagination, or with erotic and oneiric dimensions that elaborate what Merleau-Ponty calls “the interior tapestries of the real.”

Seel’s richly informed and analytically meticulous study of appearing in both its aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms and Merleau-Ponty’s attentiveness to the complexity of sensuous participations seem to me to offer a basis for fruitful interchange. Moreover, while I find myself in agreement with Seel’s point that “the sensuality and the intellectuality of art works are one thing” (S,106) – a point that resonates with both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty—I also want to stress the importance of his discussion of violence which neither of these two earlier thinkers do justice to, either in terms of the violence that may be integral to beauty or of the violence, so prominent in contemporary society, that art is called upon to address.