

CROSSCURRENTS IN THOUGHT:
MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND THOMÉ H. FANG
ON THE GROUND OF ART

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This work presents the current of thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Thomé H. Fang on the ground of art. In the crosscurrent, mutually enriched differences coalesce. Human beings reveal themselves and interact with each other by perception, by language, by sexuality and by art. In order to understand the language of art and delight fully in the aesthetic experience, Merleau-Ponty advises it is important to know the relation of flesh and spirit, as it occurs in lived interaction between selves and world subjectively and intersubjectively. The human being is in-the-world, both as perceiver and perceived, in various aspects of lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty:

My body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the “other side” of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself...[it is] a self...that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future.

Perception is essential to the creative and aesthetic activities of human beings. Beauty, the source and object of art, appeals first to the perceptive function of the body-subject. Merleau-Ponty elaborates this foundation of art and of the aesthetic experience by first laying the groundwork of the bodily situation in the world. For him the person in-the-world perceives objects against a background (figure-background reminiscent of a painting). That is perhaps where we should initially see the work of Merleau-Ponty on art. Merleau-Ponty views art, directly and indirectly in his major works; specifically in several articles, such as “Indirect Language and the Voice of Silence,” “The Doubt of Cezanne,” “Eye and the Mind.” For him, the cradle of art is the voice of silence within each person: “It is necessary to consider the word before it is pronounced, the foundation [root] of silence which never ceases to encompass it, without which the word would say nothing.”² Out of this inner silence the creative impulse becomes, is incarnate in the work of art, be it the language of poetry, artistic prose, painting, sculpture and all artistic works which human beings can create. For Merleau-Ponty our view of the human being:

Will remain superficial...unless we discover beyond the constituted word the primordial silence, and describe the

gesture which has broken that silence...unless we discover the genesis of the signification in its nakedness and novelty.³

Merleau-Ponty singles out the novel as the kind of communication which expresses silently and compares it to the painting, because we can know the subject of a novel as we can see the subject of a painting. Merleau-Ponty likens the body to a work of art; yet, the works of art are created by the body; although conceived by the mind, they are expressed in matter: canvas and color for the painting, sound for music, the word for poetry and for the novel, marble, stone, metal for sculpture and the building arts. Fang views art, directly and indirectly in his major works; specifically in several articles, such as “Artistic Ideals,” “West and East Meet on the Ground of Art.” For Fang:

Art is a form. Art has a content. It bears out a standard of value to be lived up to. Its well-composed form bodies forth an ideated content that is satiated with significance in the guise of visionary intuition, as well as of spiritual ecstasy.⁴

Merleau-Ponty seems to favor the art expressed by the word and by painting which he considers very similar to each other. True speech is creative, it is the incarnation of thought, it signifies even by its silence, that is, it expresses by what it does not say as much as by what it says. The painter reaches us by the silence of color and line; we can decipher the painter’s meaning only after we have enjoyed the work. Fang, reminds us here of Chuang Tzu’s statement, “Eloquence does not need words.”⁵

The nature of painting and the work of the artist are not what they appear to be to a casual observer. Merleau-Ponty relates how different the work of Matisse appeared when recorded by camera in slow motion:

The impression was prodigious, so much so that Matisse himself was moved, they say. That same brush which, seen with the naked eye, leaped from one act to the other, was seen to mediate in a solemn and expanding time—in the imminence of a world’s creation—to try ten possible movements, dance in front of the canvas, brush lightly several times, and crush down finally like a lightning stroke upon the one necessary line.⁶

Merleau-Ponty justly remarks that Matisse’s one stroke could not have been chosen from an infinity of possibilities. It is nevertheless a choice: this one line was to fulfill the many conditions which only Matisse could have formulated relative to the painting as a whole, a painting not yet existing, yet already complete, in a sense. The same happens in the artistic word: the choice is of the expression which alone can render the significance, the hidden meaning which has been elaborated in the interior

silence. Both language and painting speak with a tacit language. Merleau-Ponty then asks, what does the artist reveal? What do we expect from art? We do not expect from artists what we expect from writers and philosophers. From Art we accept what is offered; and Art gives us the raw world, so to speak, from which it draws “in full innocence,” unlike science, which disregards the sensible, the things themselves, to deal in things-in-general, in artificial models and experimental operations.

The painter, the artist, has a special privileged position before the world; “the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.” Painters, artists, can choose a style of life totally different from that of the society in which they live, yet they are accepted as if people knew their special calling justified it. Likewise, no one complains when the artist’s work, drawn from this world with its good and evils, is such that it crushes hopes and kindles anger. This is because the life of the artist is often a troubled one, beset by difficulties and obstacles. Yet the artist does not cease creating, even when all hope in life seems lost and despair is crushing the heart. Most of the great artists experienced suffering, were beset by doubts and often lived in solitude. Merleau-Ponty was keenly aware of this and tried to understand the soul of the artist as it underwent trials and sorrows; he wondered whether the work of art carried within itself a more profound value and greatness as a consequence of the artist’s greater depth of beauty; for suffering purifies the soul and renders it more sensitive to the good and the beautiful.

In “The Doubt of Cezanne” Merleau-Ponty tries to discover the reason for the interior anguish and discontent which the great painter experienced throughout his life, a spiritual and psychological trouble which sometimes made him fear for his own reason. This is probably with many, perhaps all, artists but with Cezanne it was a constant source of agony, although he was able to paint even under the most stressful circumstances, such as his mother’s death. He was given to anger and depression. But this did not prevent others from recognizing him as a genius.

Merleau-Ponty observes that by studying the life of an artist we do not really learn anything, yet, paradoxically, if we know how to understand its expression, we can discover in it the person itself: an artist’s life is contained and open to us in the work itself. Cezanne was never totally in possession of himself and for the most part he only saw the misery of his bodily life and his artistic deficiencies (real or imaginary). He realized his artistic freedom through his canvas and colors. He constantly re-examined his works, waiting from others the assessment of his value as an artist. That was his reason for anxiously scrutinizing the attitude of others viewing his painting and that is also why he never stopped painting. Indeed, says Merleau-Ponty, “We never quit life. We never see the idea or liberty face to face.”⁸ Merleau-Ponty asks from whence comes the artist’s urge to press on, to express, to

seek incessantly the secret of Being: We cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into painting. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not to the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions, but that body which is an intertwining of wisdom and movement.

Vision and movement are necessary bodily powers for both life and art. Merleau-Ponty insists that our seeing is the vision, the real world; not an abstraction, an image or a representation of the world but an immersion in the visible by the body. The artist approaches what is seen by a deliberate act of looking and opens to the world. We see that, unlike other philosophers, Merleau-Ponty does not begin with the inner vision of the artist; on the contrary, he claims that everything in art comes originally from the body, from the outside world of things. These, in turn, must be in some way “repeated in the body by a secret visibility...things have an internal equivalent in me.”¹⁰ For Fang:

The beauty of the universe is to be comprised within life and its exuberant vitality; the beauty of life is to take shape in the mode of concordant creation. This is the fundamental principle underlying all forms of Chinese art.

The painter may well carry within the vision which will be transformed in the work of art but Merleau-Ponty warns that the labor of the artist must not be underestimated. It requires both study and thought “which allows us to speak of a language of painting...Some think that the painting does not so much express the meaning as the meaning impregnates the painting.”¹²

Must we say then that the work of art, the painting in particular, is drawn exclusively from the material world? What may be the role of the imagination, of the creative novelty which we expect from art? Does Merleau-Ponty elaborate a kind of materialistic theory of art which excludes both spirit and imagination, dream and vision? Hardly. It is difficult to penetrate the complex view of art presented by Merleau-Ponty because of the inherent ambiguity of flesh/spirit relations, which he sees always at work in a lived dialectic. He says that the image is not a mere copy or second rate thing. The picture is not something taken from reality to indicate some other kind of being. The imaginary, says Merleau-Ponty, is within as well as without the artist, a real re-creation of the actual, not a mere thinking about things to be portrayed:

The imaginary is much farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue only according to the body...it does not present the mind with an occasion to rethink the constitutive relations of things...it offers to our sight, so that it might join

with them, the inward traces of vision...it offers to vision its inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real.¹³

Under the guidance of the principle of comprehensive harmony, "Anything we meet with in life and the world is taken to be congenial with our nature."¹⁴ For Fang:

The Chinese artists do not conceive of beauty in terms of human body. They always choose to be charmed by the vivacity of human spirit. Passing beyond physical reality, they replace the configuration of the thing itself by the atmosphere in which that thing will evolve in human mind an inspiring ideal that is most sweet, comely, and charming in respect of life.¹⁵

Merleau-Ponty feels the intense impact of art in all its forms, as if both the artist and the spectators were penetrated by the things themselves. He quotes Andre Marchand:

I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe, and want to penetrate it...I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.¹⁶

Merleau-Ponty accepts the notion of inspiration with regard to art but he takes it in an ontological sense, as inspiration as well as expiration of Being. For him, as he also says of the world, there is a melange of activity and passivity so that it is almost impossible to distinguish who paints from what is painted; just as it is difficult to distinguish the speaker from the listener when the meaning appears. This is a spiritual embrace, for Fang:

Any one who creates, or any one who appreciates, some kind of exuberant beauty must enter into the very depth of spiritual context of experience, otherwise its meaning will remain forever inaccessible.¹⁷

Does Merleau-Ponty work out a metaphysics of painting? Of Art also? It seems so, if we consider the concluding statements of his critique of Descartes' Dioptric. He claims that that analysis makes him realize that any theory of painting is a metaphysics. This is remarkable, for phenomenologists do not specifically point out the metaphysical underpinning of their investigation, although they admit a basic reality which manifests itself through phenomena. In this case, the phenomenon is vision, space, body, for even thought is occasioned by happenings in the body. This thought is in a way, passively and mysteriously related to bodily nature, not therefore autonomous and a creation of the free intellect. For George Chih-Hsin Sun, human nature is deeply grounded on the ontological presupposition of Creativity:

As the ground of value, “Creativity” in the Chinese usage is the cognate for “Life.” This is why it has always in Chinese cultural tradition that Reverence for Life is the foundation of morality; in fact, it is the point of convergence for the metaphysical, religious, aesthetical, and moral experiences crystallized into a philosophical anthropology.

Innumerable other questions could be asked: what is depth, what is light, what is space, what is dimension, what is distance? The artist uses, creates all of these without defining them: they are part of the field of vision, of the texture of the real. These are not thoughts for the painter but actualizations of vision. The artist’s thought is the painting. For Merleau-Ponty, the eye is that which opens us to the world of Being and that which opens “the soul to what is not soul—to the joyous realm of things.”¹⁹ In the appearance, for Fang, lurks another different realm of reality:

Thus it is that the spirit of Chinese art, cast in a net of symbolic and consummate expressions, makes, through the magic touch of creation, the world a most fair appearance of the interwoven context of profound meanings. In that context life is not all as you see it here, however beautiful and enchanting its present phase may be, but, as it were, a miraculous agency, as an inexhaustible flux of energy, that can strip ‘the veil of familiarity’ and clear away the mist of profanity in order to give a presentiment.²⁰

Every effort of the artist is a new way towards the discovery of the world; it calls for even further discoveries. The world will never be totally captured in painting. There is no universalization of painting or of any art for that matter, because the world, Being, can neither be enclosed in a concept, nor “conquered in painting.” Why? Because Being is never complete; it never fully is for us who witness its becoming. Art is forever striving to capture Being in its becoming and its work is never complete; there is always more to come. Eye and Mind can struggle for the final achievement in art but that is not to be: we cannot ever possess the world in art. Still, “if creations are not a possession, it is not only that, like all things, they pass away; it is also that they have almost all their life still before them.”²¹ The spirit of art, like the spirit of love, for Fang, is embraced by alluring admiration:

The spirit of art gives expression to the spirit of love. Love, which is really a great art of making life perfectly beautiful, is just the intimate communion in intensified emotional contrasts like the convection of opposite electric charges across a spark-gap.²²

Notes

- 1) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 162-163.
- 2) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 58.
- 3) Mary-Rose Barral, *The Body in Interpersonal Relations* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), p. 186.
- 4) Thomé H. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 154.
- 5) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 121.
- 6) Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 45.
- 7) Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- 8) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1948), p. 44.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 11) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
- 12) Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- 13) Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
- 14) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 16) Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
- 17) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- 18) George Chih-Hsin Sun, "A Summit Meeting in Metaphysics, Religion, and Philosophical Anthropology: The Chinese-Indian-Western Encounter on Creativity", *Proceedings of the First*

International Conference on Sinology (Taipei: Academica Sinica, 1982); its Chinese version published in *Journal of Confucius-Mencius Studies*, no. 43-44 (1982), p. 152.

- 19) Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
- 20) Thomé H. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- 21) Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
- 22) Thomé H. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.