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Sensation as participation in visual art

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Abstract

Can an understanding be formed of how sensory experience might be presented or manipulated in visual art in order to promote a relational concept of the senses, in opposition to the customary, capitalist notion of sensation as a private possession, as a sensory impression that is mine? I ask the question in the light of recent visual art theory and practice which pursue relational, ecological ambitions. As Arnold Berleant, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Grant Kester see it, ecological ambition and artistic form should correspond, but they fail to recognize sensation as a site where the ecological cause can be fought. Jacques Rancière argues for the political force of the senses, but his distribution of the sensible does not address the particularity of sensory experience. I identify the difference between these approaches within recent relational or ecological aesthetics and my position on sensibility, and indicate some of the problems involved in referring to the senses. I set out the concepts that are central to the cultivation of relational sensibility: style, autofiguration, and the mobility of sensory meaning, extrapolated from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Paul Cézanne. They amount to positioning the senses ontologically as movements along lines of conceptual-sensory connection and implication, based on the transfer of meanings created artistically through style and autofiguration.

Keywords: Autofiguration, Cézanne, conceptual-sensory, ecology, ontology, style.

I

The sense of having

Do we *have* sensations? Is that area of white of my office wall, *as I perceive it, mine*? Are the senses impressions *which we receive*? Karl Marx raises these questions in “Private Property and Communism,” a fragment from his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, written in 1844 when he was in Paris. His response to the questions is unequivocal. The creation of private property by capitalism breaks down fundamental relations into things, and this happens with the senses too: “*all* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of all the senses – the sense of *having*.”¹ Against this view of the senses, Marx argues for their relational nature: a colour, a sound, a texture is not something external to and distinct from us to be claimed, to be made ours, but a relationship in which the perceiver, other perceivers and the world are already engaged. The way in which the world appears to us is determined by the way in which our senses approach it. But the relational nature of the senses is more fundamental than that, according to Marx. Just as vision exists for the eye and sound for the ear, etc., so the objectivity of human sensation is confirmed by the fact that the world, through our labour, our involvement with it, is a human world. “A musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form,” he argues, only come into being “through the existence of *their* objects, through *humanized* nature,” where “humanized nature” refers to the ways in which natural materials are worked, shaped, organized and ultimately given meaning through human, social interaction.² As such, the senses are always objective in that they are expressions of human, social rootedness in the world, what he terms “species-being.”³ Once private property is superseded as part of the dialectical progression from capitalism to communism, Marx declares, sensation will cease to be the having of an item (inward and passive) and become instead an expression (outward and active) of participation in species-being.

What I want to explore in this essay is whether an understanding can be formed of how sensory experience might be arranged, presented or manipulated in visual art in order to promote a relational concept of the senses in opposition to the customary, (and

arguably) capitalist notion of sensation as a private possession, as a sensory impression that is mine. This would be a concept of sensory experience that promotes the idea that the senses are a relationship with the world and with other beings. What I sense is not “mine,” is not a possession circumscribed and contained within me, but an encounter, a moment, an expanse, that already stretches out to invite the meanings, values, inclinations and possibilities that come from being in the world among others. As Daniel Dennett observes, “propriety” is a metaphor that is highly active in determining our thoughts about sensory experience. People insist that “I know *how it is with me right now*,” but this, he thinks, is essentially people wanting “to reaffirm their sense of proprietorship over their own conscious states.”⁴ Further, the “seductive step” taken by the same people upon learning that colour is not an intrinsic but a relational property – constituted by a relation between our faculties and the world – is “to cling to intrinsicity... and move it *into the subject’s head*.”⁵ Marx does not have a lot to say about how aesthetic experience might speak of or exhibit its relational nature. Ultimately, in his view, relational sense experience is restored with the arrival of communism. Rather than the relational senses arriving *with communism*, might it be possible for the generation and manipulation of sensory forms in art in actual fact to assist in the promotion of relationality and sociability?

II

Aesthetics as ecology

I ask the question in the light of recent visual art theory and practice which pursue relational, ecological ambitions. As theories and artworks, they claim to challenge the subject–object or artist–audience division by arguing that works of visual art have the capacity either to affect or to cultivate social, environmental or exchange-based states of being. Four key thinkers in this area are Arnold Berleant, Nicolas Bourriaud, Grant Kester and Jacques Rancière.⁶ The direction in which the art–ecology relation runs is different for the four thinkers though. Berleant applies environmental awareness to the ontology of art. Against the aesthetic tradition of viewing the artwork as an isolated object of disinterested reflection, Berleant argues that our environmental awareness can

open up ways of viewing art, leading aesthetic appreciation away from its “well-worn paths” and “encouraging a mutuality of participation in the aesthetic situation that joins both art object and perceiver within a unified domain.”⁷ In other words, conceiving of artworks as environments can help us achieve greater, more immersive acquaintance with art.

In contrast, Bourriaud, Kester and Rancière concentrate upon the place of art within the social sphere. Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics urges art to become grit in all forms of institutional practice and knowledge-construction. He draws on Félix Guattari to promote an “ecosophic practice” which denies the independence claimed for art by Greenberg’s formalism, and instead articulates “particular worlds and rare life forms” as subjectivities in a collective, social setting, so as (in Guattari’s words, quoted by Bourriaud) to “inoculate the venom of creative uncertainty and outrageous invention in every field of knowledge.”⁸ For Kester, it is the potential of art to generate novelty within institutional practices that is key. He proposes a dialogical aesthetic “to cultivate understanding, mediate exchange, and sustain an ongoing process empathic identification and critical analysis.”⁹ Rancière provides a broad, ontological analysis.¹⁰ For him, aesthetics and politics are intimately linked; they are both facets of what he calls “the distribution of the sensible.”¹¹ The shape of experience, the way some things are clustered together, and others are kept apart, is attributable to principles of ordering *in which we participate*. The fact that sensibility is distributed creates a common ground for aesthetics and politics in as much what we think of as the *merely* or *purely* aesthetic becomes the form of politics. Aesthetics, for Rancière, is not a self-contained, self-referring domain occupied by pure sensations or disinterested experiences of beauty, but the site in which contests are fought *and felt*. I shall clarify where my enquiry sits in relation to these studies later.

My enquiry could be construed as “aesthetics as ecology,” where “ecology” is understood as a thesis of ontological interconnectedness, to the effect that (in the words of David Keller and Frank Golley) “the essence or identity of a living thing is an expression of connections and context.”¹² The fact that ecology has become a force in the transformation of nature from an object of capitalist exploitation to “an

environment for the human being as ‘species-being’” is acknowledged by Herbert Marcuse.¹³ He even suggests that the relational sensibility given by Marx in “Private Property and Communism” might become a “radical sensibility” that turns the experience of beauty into the release of “nature’s *own* gratifying forces,” where these natural forces motivate social change away from capitalism.¹⁴ The one example he gives of such a release is the patriarchal construction of “woman” allowing her “to remain closer to her sensibility” so that she has at her disposal a fund of critical and emancipatory possibilities. However, other than a reference to the female personification of liberty – the “bare breasted” woman “holding the flag of the revolution” – in Eugène Delacroix’s painting, *Liberty Leading the People*, which is essentially a symbolic figure, Marcuse does not consider at length art, the senses or aesthetic sensibility.¹⁵

But the ecological dimension is an important one. Perhaps most significant concept for us within ecology is “belonging.” The word “ecology” is derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “house,” “dwelling place,” “a place where I feel at home,” “a place where I belong.” The ecological aim in this essay is that the notion of “belonging to a world,” as the basis of a metaphysics or philosophy of life, can tackle the deficiencies and inequalities encouraged by a “this is mine, the rest I do not care about” attitude. Yet the concept of “belonging” can be carved up by capitalism into “belongings,” things abstracted from the network of social relations and participation to become personal possessions. People tend to disregard or not to value that which they perceive as being *beyond or external to themselves*, so it could be argued that the concept of “belonging” is instrumental in reinforcing a worldview wherein human beings compartmentalize existence along the lines of what does and does not belong to me.

There is much to be done on the status of the concept of “belonging” in ecology, but this must remain the job of another essay. What I am doing here is raising the theme as a concern for ecology, and as a subject territory that I want to call to the attention of aesthetics. The philosophy of perception typically approaches sensory experience in terms of belonging, and seeks to attribute the content of sensory experience either to the world through a form of direct realism (we experience the world directly through

the senses) or to intermediaries which we receive from the world through a form of indirect realism (the world is relayed to us via sensory impressions or sense data emitted by objects). Subject to much debate between direct and indirect realists is the distinction (introduced by Democritus but formulated in modern philosophy by John Locke)¹⁶ between primary and secondary sensory qualities: the former include solidity, extension and shape, and are held to belong to their objects, whereas secondary qualities, such as colours, smells and tastes, are the results of powers within objects to produce effects in us. The assertion that sensations belong to the human subject is made more strongly by anti-realist and idealist positions, which maintain that it is the nature of the subject's cognitive faculties that govern the modes of appearance through which we come to know the world. However, such positions attract the criticism that it is never the world itself which is known but only the subject's own, internal representations of it.

This essay is the first step in what is a complex enquiry: to establish whether an area of experience that switches from being ascribed to objects, to being ascribed to subjectivity, from being theorized as distinct from thought to being theorized as requiring organization by thought, might "display" properties – I do not want to say "possess properties" given my identification of the significance of belonging – that can address how we conceive of our relationship to others and the world. As a first step, I am not going to reach any conclusions that can form a project, that can define a single, clear mode of practice whereby visual art can promote sensation as participation. Instead, I conduct some ground clearing. I set out the difference between ontological approaches within recent relational or ecological aesthetics and the focus on sensibility conducted here, and identify some of the problems involved in referring to the senses. I spend the greater part of the essay articulating concepts that I think are central to the making and viewing of art where the ambition is to cultivate relational sensibility. These are extrapolated from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Paul Cézanne.¹⁷

I shall concentrate upon visual art for three reasons. Firstly, the studies by Berleant, Bourriaud, Kester and Rancière all focus on the visual arts. Secondly, vision is arguably the sense of externality and division, the sense which tells us that the world exists independently of us and that each of its occupants is a separate, free-standing entity.

These points may not seem negative in themselves but if they are exacerbated by broader, social conditions, they can start to make us forget that we are *in* and *part of* the world, that every moment of perception is a condition of active engagement. And this is arguably what modernity has done. Cartesian thought, capitalism, and the industrialization of experience have divided fundamental relationships into isolated things, setting subjective experience apart from the objective world.¹⁸ Thus, the visual already carries a political-ontological value that demands resistance from an ecological point of view. Finally, it emerges that to concentrate upon visual art is *not to concentrate* upon visual art at all, since the visual, on the ontology of the senses developed here, reaches beyond itself to refer to other modalities and other dimensions of being.

III

Focusing on the senses

Of the four contemporary theorists introduced above, Rancière's focus is the closest to mine, as I shall demonstrate shortly. Although prompted by the interest in ecological aesthetics from Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester, I think my question is different from theirs. All three draw attention to the capacity of art to be environmental, relational or dialogic, as opposed to being thingly, in its form. That is to say, artworks are promoted which take the form of events or locations or meetings, rather than things (paintings, sculptures, photographs, etc.). As already indicated, Berleant's stance is somewhat different from Bourriaud's and Kester's though. Bourriaud and Kester concentrate on artworks which are overtly unconventional or discursive in form, such as events or environments, for example, the artists' group WochenKlausur who, in their 1994-95 work *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women*, invited attorneys, councillors, social workers, and journalists professionally involved in the cases of drug-addicted women to take boat trips together as occasions where they could speak and listen in ways other than the assertive, combative, interest-laden modes they felt compelled to adopt in professional contexts.¹⁹

In contrast, Berleant formulates an aesthetics of engagement which *could* include traditional art objects. For example, by his lights, a sculpture could become an environment on the understanding that it comes to life through the connections I make as a viewer walking around it and comparing one side with the other. I stress “could” because Berleant does not actually consider applying his aesthetics of engagement to art objects. Instead, for his aesthetics of engagement to apply to sculpture, he requires a change in the form of sculpture, so that it departs objecthood and becomes overtly relational. He announces that his aesthetics of engagement “transforms not only our appreciation of nature but the nature of our appreciation” but rather than considering sculpture as environment, as one might expect, he asserts that sculpture must adapt: “sculpture,” he writes, “provides a clear instance of the adaptability of art to aesthetic engagement” when it “takes the form of earthworks or environments.”²⁰ So sculpture cannot remain as an object for Berleant. It must surrender its concentrated, thingly form and spread itself out. He corroborates this when he seeks to turn his aesthetics of engagement into a social aesthetics, understood as “an aesthetics of the arts [that] leads us beyond the arts”.²¹ It is not painters or sculptors to whom we should turn for socially-directed inspiration, he argues, but artists “who construct environments”, for appreciating an environment or installation requires not just space but also time, the time needed to move through an installation.²² The spatiotemporal nature of environmental art means it is contiguous with and therefore can guide us in our physical, “social environment”.²³ The glaring error here, of course, is that the appreciation of painting and sculpture also takes time, so painting and sculpture, as appreciated art forms, should also, by Berleant’s logic, inform our social behaviour.

While these three approaches have much to offer in developing different forms of ecological aesthetics, I don’t think they treat the senses as a site for reappraisal. Despite the differences in their approaches, they all identify the ecological potency of art with its form or ontology, with the question of whether an artwork is a lump or a relation. They all agree that ecological or connective interests are better served by dispersed, relational artworks. As they see it, ecological ambition and artistic form should correspond. But an ontological position is overlooked. Following Marx, our being is already relational in virtue of the fact that sensation is something in which we participate. In reasoning that

ambition and form must correspond, Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester fail to recognize sensation as a site where the ecological cause can be fought. I am not contesting the promotion of relational or environmental practice. I am merely pointing out that this leaves intact the commitment to the binary, inner–outer, “what is mine” – “what is not mine” thinking. The ecological aesthetics of Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester look for alternatives to the object but do not challenge the object. From my perspective, objects are already encounters *within sensation*, and there is the possibility that the ecological ambition of promoting connection and context might be served by attending to objects as tensions between mind and world stretched out within sensation.

Rancière’s thesis, however, is supportive of the idea that the senses have a political, if not ecological, force. The distribution or organization of sensory experience is essentially political, he argues, because sensory experience always has a situation or a world, a setting which requires understanding, and therefore something which is bound up with the discursive processes – argument, agreement, disagreement, etc. – necessary for sustaining its political space. There is a Kantian dimension to this, as he admits. Aesthetics, according to Rancière, is:

the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.²⁴

To play with the senses is to impinge upon structures that are political. Because they are situated within the structures which delimit spaces and times, visible and invisible, etc., artistic practices, he continues, “are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.”²⁵ Sadly, Rancière does not provide any examples of the kind of “aesthetic intervention” in the general “distribution of ways of doing and making” that he has in mind. Examples are given of how *categories* or *forms* of art in general are tied to political structures, as in the case of the conflict created between the surface in modernist art and the politics inherent in the logic of

representation. The claim here is that surface, as it is pursued and promoted in modernist art, becomes the means by which artists, whose work as representation was customarily judged to be one step removed from political life, are elevated to being producers of great art and, furthermore, art that is brought “into the décor of each and every life” (presumably through reproductions or wallpaper imitations, since contemporary art is not within everyone’s price bracket).²⁶ But particular surfaces are not considered. The modernist surface functions in Rancière’s ontology as a concept, its political force attributable to the fact that many works, and kinds of work (for Rancière considers the surface of the typeset page as well as modernist painting) enable the emergence of “surface” as a prominent category that can be identified and traced through the aesthetico-political currents of the twentieth century.

But where would the aesthetic experience of someone standing in a gallery before a particular “surface” work by Kazimir Malevich or Mark Rothko or Alan Charlton fit in Rancière’s theory? Or is it the case that such an experience is *just* an aesthetic experience, that is, it generates meanings or associations *purely* in formal, visual terms that have no bearing, political or otherwise, beyond the visual? Surely, on Rancière’s terms, such experiences, in that they involve meanings or associations, that is, concepts from a linguistic structure, count as distributions which shake the web of aesthetico-political significance? If not, if they are *just* aesthetic experiences, then this countermands completely Rancière’s claim that the aesthetic is political. It effectively admits that it is not the sensible *at the level of the particular, including all the meanings evoked by it*, but the (socially-constructed) *linguistic framework organizing the sensible*, as in the case of the concept “surface,” whose distribution is the key to his political aesthetics. In another idiom, it is the knowledge that “surface” paintings exist (and I needn’t have seen a single one) rather than sensory acquaintance with any one “surface” painting that counts.

The rub here is the epistemological distinction between universal concept and sensible particular, and the question of whether the two have radically distinct natures whose mode of interaction is deeply problematic. Rancière’s Kantianism suggests the distinction is not problematic for him and that the two terms can intersect in a fashion consistent with and supportive of his “distribution of the sensible” thesis, on the

grounds that conceptuality and particularity are mutually defining terms, following Kant's dictum "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."²⁷ But he does not refer to conceptual-particular mutuality. Furthermore, when his philosophy is taken up by art theory, as in the case of Claire Bishop's evaluation of Rancière in the context of socially-engaged art practices, the aesthetic remains as a category and not as an encounter with the sensible particularity of an artwork. In opposition to the claim that socially-engaged art functions by rejecting any aesthetic properties, Bishop draws on Rancière to the effect that (in Bishop's words) "the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains [the] ameliorative promise of a better world to come."²⁸ Several works of socially-engaged practice are described, for example, Phil Collins's two-channel video installation *they shoot horses* (2004), showing nine Palestinian teenagers (paid by Collins) disco-dancing continuously for eight hours in front of a garish pink wall in Ramallah, but no indication is given of how its aesthetic properties deliver on the promise.²⁹

There is the problem of reference though. "Sensation" and "the senses" are broad terms. How am I using them? We have already encountered the Kantian thesis that the senses are conceptually organized. For Marx and Rancière, this takes the form of the senses always already being implicated in political or ideological frames of reference. The issue here is: what exactly am I referring to when I talk of "sensation" and "the senses"? Is it possible to be exact when it seems that such terms, rather than denoting a clearly circumscribed region of perception, in fact bring with them already active processes of conceptual or political determination? As Gilbert Ryle observes, we do not have "a 'neat' sensation vocabulary."³⁰ Ordinarily we refer to sensations in cases when a particular sensation stands out from the general run of experience, as in the cases of pleasures, pains and discomforts. Beyond this, we do not refer to them. We are much more accustomed to referring to things, emotions, and abstract concepts. Quite why this is the case is potentially a very relevant question for this study, since it is ultimately a question of the value and significance we attach to what the senses *are or make available or deliver*, as well as the question of how they are described.

But I am referring to “the senses” again when the issue is what exactly is covered by the phrase, whether it should be a phrase that so readily gives the impression of things called “the senses,” and whether their value can be described in terms of “deliverables,” items which arrive “at the door,” so to speak, of one’s awareness. There is the question posed in the philosophy of perception of whether or not the senses are dumb, that is to say, whether the information we receive about the world through them is contained *in them* (in which case, they are said to have representational content) or *is external to them* and is applied to them through description or interpretation (in which case, they are said to be dumb). For example, Charles Travis extends John Langshaw Austin’s claim that the senses are “silent” (“dumb”) by arguing that the kind of experience conveyed by the senses does not possess the certainty of or “commitment to” a state of affairs that a descriptive sentence does.³¹ But what decides “inside” and “outside” here? The “inner–outer” metaphor is redolent of empiricist vocabulary which conceptualizes the senses as channels, with each sense coming to us, in Locke’s words, “by the proper inlets appointed to each sort.”³² But even to bring this “inner–outer” or “channel” image to the senses is already to exercise conceptual determination.

The scope of the senses, and the extent to which they already include conceptual or political determination, creates some difficult though nonetheless valuable complexities for my study. Scope is a question of belonging, asking whether or not the determination belongs to the senses *pure or proper*, whatever this may be. This makes progress difficult because I cannot be certain how I am cutting up sensory experience, and threatens to become circular in as much as any attempt to establish the nature of what belongs to pure sensation will also be an act of conceptual determination, including the application of metaphors of purity and propriety. There is also the irony of embarking upon an exploration of the capacity of the senses to promote a relational ontology, only to find that they cannot be individuated because of the already-conceptual and already-political relations in which they are set. But this predicament is also the saving grace for my study. If the senses are already conceptualized and politicized, then it is precisely this conceptualization and politicization that needs to be wrestled with in addressing the promotion of relationality. Any argument, example or reference I introduce will also introduce its own predetermination, and so the ensuing debate will consist of the

exchange between competing conceptual schemes or ideologies. Because of the Kantian nature of the predicament, reasserted (although not necessarily in Kantian terms) by Marx and Rancière, the study can take it as a given that the senses are always, already written, conceptualized, theorized. The focus of the study then is this: is it possible for the senses-as-conceptualized (hereafter “the senses” on the basis that their conceptually- and ideologically-determined nature is acknowledged) to be manipulated within visual art in the interests of promoting a relational nature?

V

Relational sensibility in Merleau-Ponty on Cézanne

To reiterate: “relational sensibility” refers to sensory experience that promotes the awareness that what I am experiencing is an encounter, a moment, an expanse, that stretches out to invite the meanings, values, inclinations and possibilities that come from being in the world among others. Is there a way in which artists can generate visual forms that might cultivate this awareness? As I have indicated, this will not be a question of the form of the artwork, a question of whether it is a painting or an event. Is there instead something that can be made to occur within sensory experience that will suspend alienated, internal–external perception and stimulate a sense of participation? Merleau-Ponty makes a suggestion. He identifies a kind of painting typified by appearances mid-way between representation and abstraction that he sees as revelatory of the embodied nature of human being. Of interest to Merleau-Ponty is the fact that the paintings of Cézanne and Klee can be read to function not as representations but as works whose own internal organization displays the activity of the body in the construction of the works themselves and, beyond that, the organization of the world. Merleau-Ponty takes one of Cézanne’s paintings of Mont St. Victoire as an exemplar:

The painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all ‘autofigurative’. It is a spectacle of something only by being a ‘spectacle of nothing’, by breaking the ‘skin of things’ to show how things

become things, how the world becomes world... The ‘world’s instant’... is still hurled toward us by his painting.³³

The “skin of things” is broken in that the dabs of paint sit not as the mere outlines or facets of the represented object but as gestures that are the coming-into-being of the picture, where the picture is a zone of interaction between artist, mountain, canvas, paints, brushes, and ourselves, the viewers. The painting is not a representation before the world but *part of the world*. It is in this respect that Merleau-Ponty finds the painting of Mont St. Victoire “autofigurative”: it is (a record of) its own coming-into-being (which includes its being viewed by audiences). The phrases in brackets, and the question of whether they should be in brackets, are decisive. In one sense, the painting is a record of Cézanne’s embodied activity, but in another, autofigurative sense, it is not, for it endures as an arrangement of paint on a surface, as a piece of continuously active technology at the centre of the interaction between artist, mountain and audience. The fact that the dabs coalesce *to look like a mountain* is not an additional feature which has to be explained, in the style of attempts by analytic aesthetics to explain how a picture can correspond to its object, since Cézanne’s arrangement of paint on the canvas, how one brushstroke sits in relation to another, and our perception of it, already constitute the network of relationships that defines what the painting is from the point of view of Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics. The “work” in the latticework of senses, bodily joints, negotiations between space and flat canvas, and colour distribution that defines the appearance of the mountain is already present in the painting *not as a thing* but as an original and continuously active relationship that extends to include Cézanne and ourselves. It is in this respect that the painting is autofigurative *and* relational, with these concepts being two sides of the same coin. The painting is a technology: the origin of relations – a nexus of paint, surface and environment – that coordinates the embodied behaviour of painter and viewer.

But what makes Cézanne’s painting of Mont St. Victoire a good example of exhibited relational sensibility? One interpretation is that it feels as if the dabs of paint are always prompting me to look elsewhere on the canvas, so that rather than sitting as brushstrokes which exhibit a sense of “this is an accurate depiction of a stretch of

mountainside” or “look closer at the authentic detail these brushstrokes have achieved,” they become forces at work in my experience, directing my gaze, almost taking me over. The painting becomes an activity that I join. I am less inclined to think of it as an isolated, consumable representation, and more inclined to become involved in the movements prompted by the dabs of colour that continuously reinforce one another. My description of Cézanne’s brushstrokes as “dabs” is significant. On first reading, this might sound disrespectful: “dab” suggests a lack of care, precision or expertise. But in a phenomenological context, it is the brutish, incomplete and almost unconsidered properties of the dab that, I think, are doing much of the work in moving my attention around the painting. It is as if, when I focus on a particular dab, the feeling is that there is not a lot to see in this particular area, and so my attention moves on. One might expect that an artist who wields paint in such a way as to create a sense of “there’s not a lot to see here” is lacking in experience or talent, is someone who does not know how to invest all areas of the canvas with enough detail to capture our attention. But in the present context, the brutish incompleteness is a vital component in a network of prompts, redirections, and motivations that structure a painting as an embodied exchange rather than as a representation.

My appeal to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reading of Cézanne is not a coincidence. A distinctive feature of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger’s as well, is the attention it pays to the formulation of experience in terms that depart from the Cartesian subject–object divide. The principal concept in this regard for Heidegger is his reformulation of human being as *Dasein* or “being there”: a state of being located in a situation, working with an environmentally-relevant aim or ambition through an interplay of situatedness and directedness that cannot be divided into “subject” and “object.”³⁴ The comparable attempt by Merleau-Ponty to articulate being in the world is achieved through the body, except the body is not a thing which belongs to the subject, a flesh and bone container for the soul, but a series of jointed negotiations with an environment. The ecological significance of his work on embodiment has been noted by David Abram and Berleant.³⁵ As Abram observes, the human body Merleau-Ponty writes about

is very different from the body we have been taught to see and even to feel, very different... from that complex machine whose broken parts or stuck systems are diagnosed by our medical doctors and 'repaired' by our medical technologies.³⁶

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is that which

enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or places, to insinuate myself in other lives... The body is my very means of entering into relation with all things.³⁷

In this ontological capacity, the body is what Merleau-Ponty terms a "body schema": a framework whereby consciousness and the world are opened-up for each other.³⁸ Not only is it the medium which organizes a coherent sensory picture of the world for us, but also something active and prospective which is able to play this constructive, objective role because it moves around the world and maps it out for us.

A feature of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the notion that the senses operate within lines and joints of connection and implication between different aspects of being. Take the example of the colour red. "This red," Merleau-Ponty writes,

is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colours it dominates or which dominate it, that it attracts or that attract it, that it repels or that repel it. In short, it is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and successive. It is a concretion of visibility. It is not an atom.³⁹

The red in front of me is not a pure, simple phenomenon but a differentiated and complex one. The senses, rather than being conceptualized as five individual source channels filling the subject with information from the world, are presented by Merleau-Ponty as modes of interaction that are able to open out a relation between subject and object because they are internally coordinated *with one another*. Just as any coordinate or

triangulation system defines one location in terms of another, so colours, for example, become comprehensible elements in the construction of a world

if they cease to be closed states or indescribable qualities presented to an observing and thinking subject, and if they [instead] impinge within me upon a certain general setting through which I come to terms with the world.⁴⁰

Synaesthetic perception is, therefore, “the rule”:

Sight, it is said, can bring us only colours or lights, and with them forms which are the outlines of colours, and movements which are the patches of colour changing position. But how shall we place transparency or ‘muddy’ colours in the scale?... The brilliance of gold palpably holds out to us its homogeneous composition, and the dull colour of wood its heterogeneous make-up. The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass... In the same way, I hear the hardness and unevenness of cobbles in the rattle of a carriage, and we speak appropriately of a “soft”, “dull”, or “sharp” sound.⁴¹

This could be construed merely as the point that instances of joined sensation are learned through association, ideas that are put together over time because experience teaches us that they come together. In other words, the senses are essentially separate but can be related *empirically*. However, it is the use to which Merleau-Ponty puts this point that is significant. For him, the relational nature of the senses is a basic *ontological* condition, a condition of the human subject being able to organize any meaningful experience at all. It is precisely the interactions between the senses, he observes, which enable the human subject to open onto and to navigate her way around the world. Colour is not simply colour but, in virtue of being an embodied condition, something which exceeds colour, which exhibits properties that apply to the world at large.

It is for this reason, Merleau-Ponty argues, that “each brushstroke [of Cézanne’s] must satisfy an infinite number of conditions,” must in principle be able to impel us on to other things.⁴² The *look* of incompleteness or being unconsidered, of course, does not mean that Cézanne painted in a rushed, haphazard fashion. As Merleau-Ponty observes,

Cézanne sometimes pondered hours at a time before putting down a certain stroke, for, as [Émile] Bernard said, each stroke must ‘contain the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline, and the style’.⁴³

I do not endorse Bernard’s “container” metaphor, since this effectively locks these properties within the stroke, whereas one of the governing ideas of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is that experience only has meaning because of the lines and joints of connection and implication between aspects of being. More precisely put, each aspect of being *appears to have* certain properties, for example, an “angry” red or a person’s comportment conveyed by the click of their heel as they walk, but the properties, rather than belonging to or inhering in the aspect, only in virtue of the lines and joints of connection and implication between this and other aspects of being.

VI

Style and interpretation

My adoption of Cézanne’s painting as an example of relational sensibility raises a number of questions. If my investigation is into what forms visual art might take to promote the relational nature of the senses and Cézanne’s painting is accepted as an exemplar, does that mean that I am committed to recommending that artists who wish to promote relational sensibility have to paint like Cézanne? If it were the case, it might not be a bad thing. The middle ground between representation and abstraction is an exciting area in which to work. While there may not be dab-like gestures in the other visual arts, there are certainly dab-equivalent gestures, for example, in cubist and futurist sculpture and in the photographic montages of David Hockney and John Stezaker.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the middle ground between representation and abstraction is

characteristic of early-to-mid-twentieth-century Western art, and the obligation to work in the area may strike some artists as a limitation. If I want to rally artists to the cause of expanding aesthetics as ecology, I am going to lose some interest if I have to add, “Oh, and by the way, you can only work between representation and abstraction.”

But this objection trades on the idea that there is such a thing as a Cézanne-like way. It is as if the painting were reducible to a style, a thing, a look, something definite which could be detached from this particular work or series and then applied elsewhere in a variety of other contexts. This point hinges upon how style is understood. There is the sense of ‘style’ as formulaic image-making, as signature, as product almost, and this is what is to the fore when we think that there is such a thing as a Cézanne-like way. But to do this is to ignore the autofigurative, relational nature of his painting: the negotiations that take place between canvas, paint, Cézanne's body, mountain and our senses *as the coming-into-being of the work*. In this regard, style has an ontological significance, as Merleau-Ponty acknowledges. Quoting André Malraux, he declares that “perception already stylizes”:

A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a coloured mannequin, or a spectacle; she is ‘an individual, sentimental, sexual expression’. She is a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk or even in the simple click of her heel on the ground, just as the tension of the bow is present in each fibre of wood ... If I am also a painter ... there will be in the painting not just ‘a woman’ or ‘an unhappy woman’ or ‘a hatmaker’. There will also be an emblem of a way of inhabiting the world, of treating it, and of interpreting it by her face, by clothing, the agility of the gesture and the interior of the body – in short, the emblems of a certain relationship with being ...

‘All style is a shaping of the elements of the world, allowing it to be oriented toward one of its essential parts’ [Malraux]. There is meaning when we submit the data of the world to a ‘coherent deformation’. That convergence of all the visible and intellectual vectors of the painting toward the same meaning, \times , is already sketched out in the painter’s perception. It

begins as soon as he perceives – that is, as soon as he arranges certain gaps or fissures, figures and grounds, a top and a bottom, a norm and a deviation, in the inaccessible fullness of things. In other words, as soon as certain elements of the world take on the value of dimensions to which from then on we relate all the rest, and in whose *language* we express them.⁴⁵

Although we might think of style as an object, a signature, a way of being that we are in charge of and can reproduce at will, it operates ontologically for Merleau-Ponty as the way entities – not just humans, for “the tension of the bow is present in each fibre of wood” – carry themselves in the world, with all the properties and manners they exhibit and actions they conduct or facilitate occurring as elements signifying their comportment towards other things. An object and a technology can be said *to have a style* in as much as they lend themselves to certain ways of being. Their key phrase is “lend themselves”: the nature of an object or tool is not bundled up within it but expressed through the relations and exchanges it offers to embodied beings. If we are painters, producing ‘coherent deformations’ of the world, then there will be a meeting of styles as bodies, technologies and objects come together in the production of the painting, with the coherence of the deformation expressed as the negotiation between styles, between perception and figure–ground composition, between one dimension and how it speaks of other dimensions, between one language and another.

Another question for my use of Cézanne is whether or not it is the painting or my interpretation of the painting which is communicating relational sensibility. If I am investigating what forms visual art might take to promote relational sensibility, isn’t there the danger that I am imposing a philosophical interpretation on the work, when the work itself can readily be interpreted as the depiction of a landscape or the depiction of Cézanne’s experience of the landscape, *without any compulsion* to acknowledge the work as something that is trying to draw attention to the relational nature of perception. “Is it in the work or in the interpretation of the work?” is one of the perennial questions of modern aesthetics and criticism. Interestingly enough, it was the relational nature of perception that motivated Cézanne to make the paintings. His desire to capture not the landscape but *the experience of being in the landscape* is well-documented.⁴⁶ The poet Joachim

Gasquet often accompanied the painter on his walks in the Provençal countryside, and he recalls Cézanne's description of nature as

two parallel texts: nature seen and nature felt, the nature which is out there (he indicates the blue and green plain) and the nature which is in here... (he taps himself on his forehead) both of which must unite in order to endure.⁴⁷

At first glance, the existence of biographical information confirming Cézanne's interest in the depiction of experience would seem to suggest that the artwork–interpretation opposition doesn't hold in this case: interpretation and artwork are as one because it was the intention of the artist that the artwork should embody certain themes, and it is in terms of the same or related themes that Merleau-Ponty interprets the work. Except, of course, the presence of intention does not guarantee that the intended meaning will be read in the final work. The final form of a work, with all the interventions introduced by tools and materials, can suggest meanings that are remote from what the artist intended. In one sense then, Cézanne is not a special case: despite his intention, we still face the question of how we distinguish between whether it is the sensory artwork or its interpretation that promotes relational sensibility. There is a larger question of how an artist steers her intention in relation to her technologies and materials. Pursuing the question would involve establishing how she understands the relation, and what kind of impositions, negotiations or surrenders occur between intention and the signifying potential of technology and material.

The “interpreting artwork” question parallels the difficulty encountered earlier regarding the impossibility of distinguishing between concept and sensation: how to isolate what is proper to the senses, given that the senses are always subject to conceptual determination? It might be answered in a similar vein. The danger that “relational sensibility” is a meaning read into a work *wholly irrespective of its sensory form* is overstated because, rather than being an innocent object whose semantic or aesthetic significance is at risk of being pulled hither and thither by an external interpretive force, an artwork always already exists under interpretation. A work of art is always already on the way to meaning because the senses are themselves always already conceptualized. As we have

seen with Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics, the senses operate along lines of connection and implication between different aspects of being. To ask whether it is the work or the interpretation which finds the relational sensibility is to ignore the stipulation that "work" and "interpretation" are intersecting or overlapping lines of connection in the metaphysics given here. A work of art is not produced in the realm of the senses, and then placed in the realm of interpretation for evaluation, for the simple reason that makers and viewers occupy conceptual-sensory domains.

To ask if it is necessary for the conceptual-sensory domains of the maker and the viewer to overlap would be to rely too heavily on the spatial connotations of "domain." All that is admitted is that makers and viewers enjoy meaningful sensory experience, and that sensory experience, on the phenomenology-informed ontology given in this essay, is theorized as a state of connection and implication. A colour, a sound or a texture will necessarily evoke or signify *something or other*, where "the other" is important because it confirms that the meaning is suggestive, dynamic, "moving on," in keeping with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that this red

is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colours it dominates or which dominate it.⁴⁸

So the worry of relational sensibility being purely a matter of interpretation, as opposed to the sensory encounter with an artwork, can be dismissed, leaving us in the more informed though nonetheless difficult position of asking: if it is accepted that the senses, on the ontology given here, are states of meaningful connection and implication, what kinds of *conceptual-sensory* formation might promote relational sensibility? One possibility is to consider *the approach taken to an artwork*, in the sense of the technologies adopted by the maker and its situation in a space (normally but not necessarily an exhibition space) for the viewer. Every physical and technological determination in the making and reception of a work will affect the conceptual-sensory meanings that occur for maker and viewer, to the point where the artwork might be considered wholly a matter of approach; that is to say, on the ontology given here, *the artwork is pure approach*: a

constellation of the conceptual-sensory meanings evoked and combined on account of the fact that the colours, forms, surfaces, and textures generated in production and encountered in exhibition exist within networks of association and implication. This is only to give a new formulation to the embodied aesthetics already introduced by Merleau-Ponty, and to emphasize that this ontology is tantamount to detonating the artwork as thing and distributing it along the lines of connection that constitute the jointed, articulate, structural nature of embodiment.⁴⁹

“Is it in the work or in the interpretation of the work?” is also asked by Paul Crowther in relation to his own “ecological theory of art” based on Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics.⁵⁰ According to Crowther, “Merleau-Ponty himself admits that whilst painting has philosophical significance as a mode of universal expression, it remains nevertheless, ‘mute’”.⁵¹ But this reading of Merleau-Ponty strikes me as decidedly unMerleau-Pontian. At no point in his essays on painting does he assert that the art form is mute. The word “mute” appears in sentences near the word “painting” but only in contexts where the mute–vocal contrast provides dramatic impetus for Merleau-Ponty’s demonstration of how the apparent silence of painting (set against noisy, signifying language) in actual fact evokes (I am aware of the metaphor) or moves us towards meaning. To take one example which would seem to fit strongly Crowther’s interpretation, in order to overturn it: “the mute radiance of painting”.⁵² This metaphor is used to make the point that verbal language does not exhaust its power in making “factual statements” or “reproducing reality”.⁵³ It comes at the end of this long sentence:

And as our body guides us among things only on condition that we stop analyzing it and make use of it, language is literary, that is, productive, only on condition that we stop asking justifications of it at each instant [i.e. checks with reality] and follow it where it goes, letting the words and all the means of expression of the book be enveloped by that halo of signification that they owe to their singular arrangement, and the whole writing veer toward a second-order value where it almost rejoins the mute radiance of painting.⁵⁴

Verbal language has a potency, a matrix of possibility, “its own rule of usage, ethics, and view of the world, as a gesture sometimes bears the whole truth about a person”.⁵⁵ This will not or cannot be said *explicitly* but is present as the ontological, embodied condition of language. “The mute radiance of painting” is a metaphor for this unspoken fund of possibility.

VI

Lessons from Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne

Where are we after Merleau-Ponty’s example of Cézanne? The aim of this study is to see whether some paths can be identified whereby appearances might be worked or manipulated in art to cultivate relational sensibility: an awareness that what I sense is not a possession circumscribed and contained within me, but an encounter, a moment, an expanse, that already stretches out to invite the meanings, values, inclinations and possibilities that come from being in the world among others. Two relevant and related themes that have emerged are the ideas of the mobile nature of sensory meaning, and autofiguration. By “the mobile nature of sensory meaning,” I mean the areas of colour *on or in* the painting are shown to signify *by pointing elsewhere*, either through prompting me to look elsewhere on the canvas or by making connections with other similar colours *and their associations*, e.g. a cooler or darker or vibrant green, where the connection between similar colours *and their associations* is one and the same process. The relational dimension is present in the sensory experience being one that, rather than simply being had or consumed, becomes a movement in which one is caught up: a movement towards other elements in the work or towards meanings and other possible, similar sensory forms; in other words, a movement within the conceptual-sensory network of meanings that define embodied experience.

I need to clarify a number of points. Firstly, I know there is a world of difference between “on the painting,” referring to paint on a canvas, and “in the painting,” suggesting elements within the world or landscape depicted by the painting. But the undecidability, I would argue, is a virtue in as much as it captures the shift between

object and embodied experience that Merleau-Ponty thinks the painting performs; it is a painting, an object, but it undermines its own status as such (and its status as a representation) by evoking responses in terms of a shared, bodily involvement in the landscape. Secondly, the connection between similar colours *and* their associations *is one and the same process* on account of Merleau-Ponty's embodied ontology, where the articulated joints of the body map out a world in which one thing bears on another, as in the case of the synaesthetic foundation of sensory experience: "one sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass."⁵⁶ For example, a switch from one green to another will, at one and the same time, be a shift in associations of freshness, softness, coolness, etc. Thirdly, and possibly of greatest concern, can the property of appearances prompting me to look elsewhere on the canvas really be held up as a dimension of relational sensibility? Isn't the fact of 'looking elsewhere' simply an aspect of our embodiment in general – we like to look around – rather than the result of a propulsive element within the brushstrokes? Yes, we do like to look around, but the "looking elsewhere" intended here is not the mere scanning or inspection of a space. Rather, it is the exploration of a series of elements within a whole, the artwork. Scanning a space, a room, a restaurant, might involve looking to see what is present or whether a friend has arrived, whereas exploring elements within an artwork includes the opportunity to consider the relationships between the elements, to view how one part moves us towards another. These acts of propulsion then are not simply the movements involved in general spatial awareness but a sequence of steps in which we are moved by the connective, implicative dimensions of the work's appearance.

How might an artwork achieve this? How do you promote this ontological, relational movement through the senses? One possibility is attentiveness to movement within the conceptual-sensory network of meanings that is achieved through the autofigurative production of a work of art. According to Merleau-Ponty, an artwork is autofigurative if it is (a record of) its own bodily coming-into-being, where the capacity for autofiguration to be displayed (the work's record-like nature) is expressed through the intersecting styles of the different elements within a work. In as much as an artwork has visible form, it will involve a material or medium, for example, paint, canvas, clay,

photographic film, a pristine gallery wall or a site-specific environment. I am focusing on the material because this will be the element that appears, that has visual form. The material will have a style in the sense that it will behave in a certain way, suggest certain concepts or metaphors, and give some form of expression to the incoming stylistic behaviours or actions of the artist. Material in this regard is “autographic”: its own properties enable or make manifest certain graphic or physical forms. Recall that I have formulated Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “style” as the way entities, including materials, carry themselves in the world, with all the properties they exhibit and actions they conduct or facilitate occurring as elements signifying their comportment towards other things.

Each of these connections will be a conceptual-sensory movement, an instance of one entity expressing its being through its interaction with the properties of another. Each mark or gesture will involve more than one technology, and therefore more than one style acting with or upon another, since the surface upon which the mark is made also needs recognition as a technology with its own autographic properties. The behaviour and autograph of charcoal on smooth paper are different from the behaviour and autograph of charcoal on thick or textured paper. The irony here (but one that is perfect for my ecological interest) is that talk of “autofiguration” and “autograph” implies self-determination and by an individual or location within a “proper,” home domain, yet they both denote processes which involve one set of properties acting upon or intersecting with another. In this regard, it might be more accurate to refer to the “predispositions” rather than the “properties” of the various elements involved in the production of an artwork, since “predisposition” offers the notion of a prior nature that is nonetheless going to negate or depart from its position.

Is it possible to evaluate these movements, to get a sense of which has the most propulsion? In another idiom, these movements might be called the most metaphorical, in as much as we are assessing the translation of one element into the form of another. Answering this question must remain the job of another essay. But the significance of the question as an outcome of a study of aesthetics as ecology should not be overlooked. One route to the promotion of relational sensibility comes from

recognizing the necessity of a conceptual-sensory ontology in addressing the senses, and that an area for further study is the nature and scale of the conceptual-sensory movements generated by autofigurative art practice. This might be a process where we follow the development of an artwork and witness the dead-ends, turning points and lines of fruition, with the latter involving identification and evaluation of the greatest, most poetic movements created by the meeting of predispositions. Artistic intention and the location of the artwork will be factors that influence choices, but precisely how they influence choice needs careful consideration. These are factors that affect the artwork as an approach, for both intention and location may influence the clusters of conceptual-sensory meanings that are prominent for the work as an embodied encounter between artefact and viewer. Does intention govern in such a way that it is inattentive to the movements evoked by certain style-upon-style arrangements, so that nascent material or technological possibilities are discarded by an intention focused on the horizon? In which case, there is the danger that relationality will be lost, since an overriding intention means many of the conceptual-sensory possibilities generated by style-upon-style interaction will have been ignored.

The final physical form and installation of a work – whether it is an object, an installation or an even more social proposition, its institutional setting, how it is lit, how we walk towards it, and the works that surround it – are also part of the work's being *as an approach*, and therefore have a bearing on which conceptual-sensory movements are recognized as the strongest. This might appear to contradict the position I held earlier on the emphasis given to the ontology of art by Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester. Although they held different views, they were united in focusing upon the ontology of art – whether it was an object, environment or social structure – as the philosophical territory in which the nature and extent of art's ecological force was to be determined. But far from contradicting my declaration to concentrate upon the senses, all that has happened is that consideration of the senses has been shown ultimately to involve an ontological thesis, via a phenomenology of the body. This is not to admit that Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester identified the most significant territory from the start but to demonstrate that the sensory properties of a work of art have ontological implications.

In a similar vein, if I had to anticipate one criticism of my approach, it would be that concentration upon the senses is too formalistic: attention is limited to formal properties of colour, texture, shape and form, at the expense of historical, political and social factors. Early twentieth-century formalism, through proponents such as Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg, asserts that aesthetic, sensory experience is purely about itself. According to Bell, the appreciation of the modern, abstract image requires nothing from life except “a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space,”⁵⁷ and there is Greenberg’s claim that the lines, colours and shapes within abstract art “confine [themselves] exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience.”⁵⁸

But it is this concept of the senses as removed from wider, conceptual concerns that my study rejects. In its place, I have argued for an ontology in which the senses are embodied states set within a network of meaningful movements, with each sensory experience opening onto others on account of the jointed articulacy provided by bodily, conceptual structures. Enjoying a complex and sometimes antagonistic relationship with formalism in mid- to late-twentieth-century art theory are structuralism and semiotics. These foster the notion that the historical and political impact of art is a consequence of language or artworks translated into linguistic models. But part of the work of this essay could be construed as transferring the dynamic, differential relations understood by structuralism to operate between words, to the senses via the body. Common to both is the notion of an articulate structure: it is just a question of whether that structure is conceived as the web of differences between signifiers – “to dread” means what it does because it is not “to fear” or “to be afraid,” to adopt Ferdinand de Saussure’s example⁵⁹ – or the jointed nature of the body, whereby the senses are not “closed states or indescribable qualities” but instead conditions which “impinge within me upon a certain general setting through which I come to terms with the world.”⁶⁰

VII

Pointers

One of the consequences of making and appreciating art in capitalist culture is that experience becomes radically personalized, with the danger that the artist and the viewer think that a sensation has the meaning it has *only for them*, or that the “true” meaning of a work of art is only available to its author. “This is how it is for me. How it is for others, I couldn’t possibly say” or “This is what the work means to me, but I suspect there may be a truer meaning locked inside the artist’s head.” This essay has examined the possibility of aesthetics as ecology in the form of a relational sensibility. One form it might take is, when making or viewing a work of art, to reflect on its sensory form. All artworks are addressed through the senses. A painting, a sculpture, an installation and social or relational practice all have sensory form. In the case of social art practice (the one of the four where we might think the senses have the smallest role), there will be, for example, the paper texture and typography of the notices and invitations, the appearance of the location which greets the participants, and the kind of person-to-person contact that is involved.

What comes from these sensations? As an artist, do you manipulate colour or form based solely on your own personal symbolism, in which X signifies Y but only because you have decided it, or do you reflect on what a colour might suggest, where the suggestion comes from the colour? What does *this* red evoke that *that* red doesn’t? This reflection on the senses involves careful looking, having several different possibilities in view so that one can stand out. Removed from any personal symbolism, this reflection on the senses is ecological in that I examine the red (for example) not for what it means to me but for the pointers it gives to other reds and other meanings along lines of conceptual-sensory connection and implication. On the ontology presented here, colour is no longer *merely* colour, and the senses are no longer *merely* the senses. The colours I perceive, the sounds I hear, are not isolated, personal events, but phenomena which reveal or ‘speak of’ my situation and the situation of others in the world.

BIOGRAPHY

Clive Cazeaux is Professor of Aesthetics at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK. He is the author of *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy: From Kant to Derrida* (Routledge, 2007) and the editor of *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (Routledge, 2011). His research interests are the philosophies of metaphor, visual thinking, visual arts research, and art-science collaboration.

Notes

¹ Karl Marx, “Private property and communism,” trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton, in Clive Cazeaux (ed.), *Continental Aesthetics Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 214.

² Marx, “Private Property,” 215.

³ Karl Marx, “Economic and philosophical manuscripts,” trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, in Lucio Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992), 327.

⁴ Daniel Dennett, “Quining qualia,” in David J. Chalmers (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 226-46; this reference 233.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 241; emphasis added.

⁶ For a good survey of the first three, see Timothy Collins, “Catalytic aesthetics,” in *Artful Ecologies: Proceedings of the Art, Nature and Environment Conference 2006* (Falmouth: University College of Falmouth, 2008), 25-42

⁷ Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 158. Berleant introduces his “aesthetics of engagement” thesis in *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). He is more concerned with the depth and quality of aesthetic experience as a form of engagement in its own right, than with the idea that aesthetic experience might be an impetus for wider, social or political involvement. It is not until his 2005 book that he considers “sketch[ing] out the case for a social aesthetics”; *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 147. I return to this in the main text.

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002), 95-6.

⁹ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 118.

¹⁰ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004); *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. S. Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

¹¹ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

¹² David R. Keller and Frank B. Golley, “Introduction: ecology as a science of synthesis,” in Keller and Golley (eds), *The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 2.

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, “Nature and revolution,” in Clive Cazeaux (ed.), *Continental Aesthetics Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 257-67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259, 261.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁶ The most famous fragment in which Democritus makes the primary–secondary quality distinction is: “By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour; but in reality atoms and void”, frequently cited as Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, VII.135. The fragment, with commentary, can be found at Christopher Charles Whiston Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999), D16, 9. The distinction is reasserted in John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), II, viii, §§9-10, 135. For further discussion of the primary–secondary quality distinction in Democritus, Locke, and the history of philosophy, see Lawrence Nolan (ed.), *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s doubt,” “Indirect language and the voices of silence,” and “Eye and mind,” all in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press). Paul Crowther uses the term “an ecological theory of art” to refer to the tradition in aesthetics from Kant, through Schiller and Hegel to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Adorno, which holds that the work of art in some way “reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world”; see Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-*

Consciousness (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 7; original emphasis. Of all the philosophers consulted, Merleau-Ponty does the most to substantiate the concept of embodied inherence underlying Crowther's ecological theory, as he admits (12). However, Crowther is more interested in extracting an ontology of art, something universal, from Merleau-Ponty's account of painting, than exploring those elements within art that might promote greater awareness of inherence.

¹⁸ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993); David Michael Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁹ WochenKlausur's 1994-95 work, *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women*, is cited by Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 101.

²⁰ Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, 171-2.

²¹ Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 148.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 17.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), A51, B75.

²⁸ Claire Bishop, 'The social turn: collaboration and its discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006, 178-83; this reference 183.

²⁹ Bishop, 'The social turn', 182.

³⁰ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin, 1990), 194.

³¹ Charles Travis, "The silence of the senses," *Mind* 113 (2004), 57-94; this reference 61-62. See also John Langshaw Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

³² John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Penguin, 1997), book 2, chapter 2, paragraph 1; book 3, chapter 4, paragraph 11.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and mind," 130 and 141.

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- ³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. James Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).
- ³⁵ David Abram, “Merleau-Ponty and the voice of the Earth,” in David Macauley (ed.), *Minding Nature: The Philosophy of Ecology* (London: Guildford Press, 1996), 82-101; *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, op. cit.; *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
- ³⁶ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 46.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 47
- ³⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 206.
- ³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The intertwining – the chiasm,” in Claude Lefort (ed.), *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press), 132.
- ⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 210.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 229-30.
- ⁴² Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s doubt,” 65.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 65-6.
- ⁴⁴ See, for example, David Hockney, *Nicholas Wilder Studying Picasso, Los Angeles 24th March 1982* (1982), and *The Crossword Puzzle, Minneapolis January 1983* (1983); John Stezaker’s various series of collages, such as *Marriage* (2006-07), *Mask* (2006-11), *Old Mask* (2006), and *Shadow* (2006).
- ⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect language and the voices of silence,” 91.
- ⁴⁶ See Michael Doran (ed.), *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). I am grateful to Robert Pepperell for this reference. For further, related insights into how artists think with their materials, see Pepperell, “Art and externalism,” *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*, forthcoming.
- ⁴⁷ Doran, *Conversations with Cézanne*, 111.
- ⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “The intertwining – the chiasm,” 132.
- ⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Cézanne’s depictions of Mont. St. Victoire are also taken by Robin Collingwood to exemplify his theory that art, unlike craft, acts like a portal between the experience of the viewer and the artist, with the reaction created in the

viewer constituting a “sharing” on the grounds that artist and viewer have similar sensory and muscular capacities. The thesis is given in Collingwood’s *The Principles of Art*, published in 1938, seven years before Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cézanne’s Doubt.” Cézanne can achieve this sharing through his paintings because, according to Collingwood, he paints ‘like a blind man’: “Trees never looked like that; that is how they feel to a man who encounters them with his eyes shut, blundering against them blindly.” (144) As with my use of the word “dabs” above, a term is applied that would normally be taken as an insult, but again the lack of incompleteness signified by “blindness” is a positive component in a theory that represents aesthetic experience as a dynamic. The incompleteness creates a gap to be filled, in this case by the sensory and muscular capacities artist and audience share, where the momentum created by the act of supplementation drives the interaction between artist and viewer: “The imaginary experience which we get from the picture is not merely the kind of experience the picture is capable of arousing, it is the kind of experience we are capable of having.” (150) See Robin George Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

⁵⁰ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*. See note 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect language”, 115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 114-15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 230.

⁵⁷ Clive Bell, “The aesthetic hypothesis,” in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 113-16; this reference 115.

⁵⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist painting,” *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 754-60; this reference 758.

⁵⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 114.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 210.