
Merleau-Ponty's Artist of Depth: Exploring "Eye and Mind" and the Works of Art Chosen by Merleau-Ponty as Preface

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I. The Works of Art as Silent Interlocutors of the Power of Depth

The original Gallimard edition of Merleau-Ponty's last-published essay, "Eye and Mind," which was printed as a slim, separate volume containing only this essay, includes a visual preface of seven artworks, chosen by Merleau-Ponty. It seems curious that there has been so little comment concerning how these artworks might serve as another way to understand what I take to be Merleau-Ponty's central point in his text: that depth is the key to understanding the power of art. This central point can be substantiated, however, only if we understand depth in a new way. The essay denies that depth is the "third dimension," as seen traditionally, but asserts rather that "if [depth] were a dimension, it would be the *first* one" (Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" 180). Depth is thus of the first rank in not only rethinking art, but also rethinking Being itself. Depth is first in rank, moreover, as it is named "the experience of the reversibility of dimensions" (180), which makes it central to Merleau-Ponty's articulation of his "indirect ontology." As this reversibility, depth is the way that humans and world become enlaced such that "inside" and "outside" are not opposites; even as impossibles they are nevertheless one. Merleau-Ponty has been developing this notion of depth as the going together of impossibles since the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but in "Eye and Mind," it becomes highlighted through the

unique vision of the artist in order to be articulated further as the heart of “the flesh of the world.” Yet, in a rather remarkable way, Merleau-Ponty presents his readers with the drawings of Giacometti and Matisse, the paintings of Cézanne, de Staël, and Klee, and the statues of Richier and Rodin, as a “silent essay” that precedes his text, and as an invitation to experience perceptually what he is about to describe as being art’s power.

Even though these reproductions can’t bring about the full experience of the works themselves, the reproductions confront us with a sense of depth that will haunt the pages of “Eye and Mind.” The artists give us an embodied experience of what Merleau-Ponty will attempt to articulate in conjunction with their reverberations within his readers. This is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s approach to describing experiences that are encountered in other fields, in order to plumb their phenomenological and, later, ontological sense. Merleau-Ponty thus juxtaposes his philosophy with work in Gestalt psychology, physics, biology, ethology, anthropology, and other sciences, but especially with the work of poets, novelists, and visual artists. Yet, philosophers who have followed in Merleau-Ponty’s footsteps have retreated to the confines of philosophy and the “high altitude” plane of theory as their sole resource to understand his work. Merleau-Ponty remained committed to finding within prereflective experience the emergence of the pivots to our sense of ourselves and the world, an ontology of becoming. The reader must be able to find the sense of his key ideas here in this “silent essay” of works of art or fail to fully grasp Merleau-Ponty’s assertions in the following essay. Accordingly, I propose first, to explore what exactly Merleau-Ponty was conveying as a more radical idea of depth than that of the philosophical and cultural tradition, but I also propose to test these ideas against the experience Merleau-Ponty almost challenges us to have with these artworks, presented as entryways into perceiving the depth he is describing in art and Being. Merleau-Ponty’s abiding fascination with

Cézanne becomes clearer to his readers when in “Eye and Mind” he quotes Giacometti’s statement about Cézanne: “I believe Cézanne was seeking depth all his life” (179), and it seems undeniable that Merleau-Ponty, too, was a depth-seeker his whole life. These artworks invite us to seek depth within them in ways we might have not imagined without Merleau-Ponty’s writing.

The title of Merleau-Ponty’s essay, “Eye and Mind,” names two phenomena that the philosophical and aesthetic tradition misunderstood, and by doing so, misconstrued both the sense of art and perception. This, in turn, ultimately yielded a false ontology. In the traditional view, eye and mind are both taken as terms of distance—a distancing of perception and of conceiving in an inner realm at a remove from the world. Merleau-Ponty, however, takes both eye and mind and throws them back into the world. Starting his essay with these silent but powerful works of art throws his readers in a parallel way into the realm in which art works and moves, away from a distanced conception of art as institution of culture. Merleau-Ponty replaces the presumed “aesthetic distance” of the artist with what he calls a “deflagration” [*deflagration*] at the heart of the relationship of artistic perception and world.¹ In this essay, I will describe how this term is yet another metaphor for depth, one that is more dynamic and acute. Eye and mind are phenomena of depth, not detachment. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that both emerge from within the depths of the world.

The first sentence of “Eye and Mind” quotes Valéry, who declares the artist to be the one who “takes his body with him”—again, in opposition to a view of mind as the means of artistic conception. The artist as mind, according to Merleau-Ponty, could not possibly paint, since mind is defined traditionally as located at a remove from the enveloping material reality of the world. Quickly, we are told that *the eye exists only as a reaching into the world*, that it is the *eye of the hands and arms and sinews* that engages within the surround. These hands, arms, and sinews

themselves exist as enveloped within a power of movement such that this movement comes from the world as much as from the painter, and certainly not from an inviolate observing mind making decisions as to how to move.² As readers required to page through these images before we are allowed to read the words that follow, we have been made through the body's powers of virtual inhabitation to move among these powerful works of art and even stand above Richier's statue of "Leaping Woman" and feel the tensed power in her body, or beside Rodin's "Crouching Woman" and experience the torsion rippling through her body and echoing in ours. As our bodies echo these lines of force in the works of art, we are drawn into a primary sense of depth, the aspect of the work of art that is most revealing of the sense of Being.

II. The Elaboration of Depth as Key to Art in "Eye and Mind"

Merleau-Ponty begins his discussion of how "the painter takes his body with him" by sketching out the space in which art happens or into which it draws us. What is painted is an elongation of the flesh of which the body is only an element, drawn beyond itself: it "is caught up in what it sees ... things are an elongation or annex of itself" ("Eye and Mind" 163). However, the paintings draw us into a sense of space that would be difficult to locate on a Cartesian grid of spatial locations. When Merleau-Ponty says that "the animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as the fissures and limestone formations [, b]ut they are not *elsewhere*" (164), he is claiming that painting emerges from a depth from which the paintings of Lascaux also emerged, and within which we still wander when we regard them in our ongoing overlap with bull, bison, stag, horse, and other creatures and plants. These creatures thrust forth from the cave walls in their likenesses, and as is the case with other beings, are linked within the temporal and spatial rhythms that are the pulsations of what Merleau-Ponty

calls a “movement by vibration or radiation” (*Visible* 184). These pulsations are displacements from Cartesian space such that “I would be at great pains to say *where* the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I look at a thing: I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it or with it, than I see it” (“Eye and Mind” 164). We wander within what is presented by the painting as an enveloping sense that has become a dimension of meaning.

The evocation of the perceiver wandering within a percept as if wandering in a dimension echoes Merleau-Ponty’s description of a simple patch of red in the “Chiasm” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*. The red described here is a “straits gaping open” (132), indefinitely linking the enfoldings and jostlings of beings, or their vibrations, which are anchored in the particular hue and its particular historical, cultural, and natural factual constellations of appearance. Like the simpler and less fevered patch of red, the dislocation in time and space engendered by the Lascaux paintings, as by all those paintings that follow in a dialogue with it in the history of painting in taking in the rendering of bull or stag, is also a “plunging into” a specific percept. Here, we are drawn into either a given or here-crafted sense that is there before us, yet which at the same time is not found in its myriad linkages that are the intertwining of its being. This sense is neither at a specific point in space and time, but nor is it not—or more precisely, it is impossibly both. This, as we will see in a moment, is the hallmark of depth. Sense here is enveloping, enjambed with varied foci, interlaced with other beings, moving and moving us, radiant as casting halos of sense from very specific percepts. Such is the primordial depth Merleau-Ponty sought to articulate and to reveal within the works of the artists he admired.

At the beginning of the essay, Merleau-Ponty also states, “There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the

other, between hand and hand, a blending of sort takes place—when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible [*quand s'allume l'étincelle du sentant-sensible*]” (“Eye and Mind” 163 [*L’Oeil et l’esprit* 21]). The chiasm between sensing and sensible here is portrayed as a consuming process—an igniting of the fire [*ce feu*] he calls the life of perception in the next phrase. Here, what is distinct becomes something dynamically, explosively flashing forth in an enveloping in-between that destroys their separate identities in order to illumine the world, to give it heat and motion, to blaze vitality, and sense. Even as the fiery sheets burn, destroy, consume, and incinerate, they are just as much the driving force of life, light, and growth—their myriad combustions unfathomable.

An example that can clarify what Merleau-Ponty means by this characterization of the artist’s expression is Van Gogh’s “Wheat Field with Crows,” referred to by Merleau-Ponty in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.” Here, he says that Van Gogh “goes further” at the moment that he paints. I think what Merleau-Ponty means by this description of Van Gogh’s work is that like Cézanne, Van Gogh dared to *go further in seeking depth* of this sort. Merleau-Ponty says of the 1890 canvas (done during the last weeks of Van Gogh’s life) that instead of trying to be a copy of a reality, Van Gogh seeks to “restore the encounter between his glance and the things which solicit it” in that moment of going beyond what has been (*Signs* 57). Looking at this canvas, we can see the wheat and even the muddy paths flow as if they are torrential rivers or a turbulent sea. Meanwhile, the sky overhead washes with impenetrable black currents that seem foreboding in one way, as if choking out the light of the sun and moon, and yet are also areas of rest and fecund silence, like a kind of floating ethereal black soil from which life emerges. The flying crows seem like blackcaps on the seas of the wheat and sky, and are both the devourers of light and space, the black angels who bring us to our deeper selves, but are also like

blackened bursts of a density of life coming down from the heavens. However, even this sense of motion doesn't capture the intensity, the almost frenzy, the fission at the core of all presented, that leaps from the canvas and engulfs it. This is the power of that *moment of encounter* here expressed and it is the depth of the vision Van Gogh accomplished at that moment. Early viewers read into this painting only the gloom of Van Gogh's impending suicide, yet the artist wrote that this group of canvases expressed both "sadness and extreme loneliness" *and* that they contained "health and restorative forces" (38). There is an overlap of opposites—gloom, life, fecundity, doom, storm, peace, loneliness, embrace, earth, sky, flight, root, and so forth. The canvas is ablaze in blue and brown and yellow and black, and with earthy colors—not normally capable of such combustion, yet which in this canvas vibrate into wildly moving interpenetrations. These burst forth in myriad directions like a deflagration, in a kind of scene that might otherwise exude a peace, but instead is set into an incendiary flow by the brush of Van Gogh. This terrible wrestling forth of the opposites in their tension, simultaneously wondrous, is a depth expressed in the painting.



FIGURE 1. Vincent Van Gogh, Wheatfield with Crows, 1890. Van Gogh Museum (in public domain)

This is the kind of deflagration sparked by the artist that Merleau-Ponty means to indicate when he says of the artist that “[i]n the immemorial depth of the visible, something moved, caught fire, and engulfed his body; everything is in answer to this incitement, and his hand is ‘nothing but the instrument of a distant will’” (“Eye and Mind” 188). This is not a projection of the “inner feelings of Van Gogh” as some critics might say, but rather, it is his hand tracing out in its sensitivity a depth of sense in a swirl of wheat, the swooping of crows, the crisscrossing vectors of paths, the infinitely heavy black clouds, and so on, with a myriad of other beings that line invisibly the texture of their visibility, set into dynamic interplay of rhythms in the surround. Yes, these interplays have their equivalents within the affective life of the artist, and this precisely is the point: they have emerged within perception where affect and percept *evoke each other and express each other*, such that the artist can render visible this invisible sense that encompasses both. The invisible sense evoked by the landscape that is gloom and fecundity, storm and peace, and so on, is not to be found anywhere in any one of the visible beings portrayed in the painting, but can be found in the way the visible expresses the invisible, a sensible idea, that can’t be grasped certainly and is inexhaustible in its meaning.

Merleau-Ponty feels that Klee expresses the idea of “deflagration” that engulfs the painter in the depth of the visible to yield the invisible, when he concludes this discussion by citing Klee: “[A] certain fire pretends to be alive; it awakens. Working its way along the hand as a conductor, it reaches the support and engulfs it; then a leaping spark closes the circle it was to trace, coming back to the eye, and beyond” (cited in “Eye and Mind” 188). Fire overruns boundaries. They disappear within fire’s intense motion and transformation, giving a glow of heat and light, to highlight and disintegrate an identity-within-process with no discrete inside and outside, running intensely along the fiber of whatever is about it, making it blaze forth more

intensely with what it is, but can no longer remain, within transformation. This deflagration is a power within things, a coming into proximity explosively, as the artist's hand takes the blaze within and finds it flowing out in such a way that all is afire, coming from the depths to the surface, the surface to the depth, from the near and the far. This is the "global voluminosity," as Merleau-Ponty puts it, when he says this deflagration demonstrates the power of primordial depth: "depth, thus understood is, rather, the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global 'locality'—everything in the same place at the same time, a locality from which, height, width and depth are abstracted" ("Eye and Mind" 180). Notice that Merleau-Ponty uses depth in the beginning and at the end of that sentence in two distinctly different senses—the first being primordial depth and the latter being like height and width, one of the three dimensions of a Cartesian grid of space—the third one.

The depth the artist seeks is the primordial depth that Merleau-Ponty further articulates as "a voluminosity we express in a word when we say a thing is *there*" ("Eye and Mind" 180). It is the same sense as the idea of "the everywhere and nowhere in particular" of the depth of the Lascaux cave paintings: there are not only bison and stags, shivering rabbits, hungry cave dwellers, but also you and I as forlorn spectators of not only these ancient creatures in the painting, but also of such creatures in zoos, including those who hunted these creatures both at the time and later than the cave dwellers, and a host of others who have been or will be solicited as witnesses of these creatures in differing specific places. This depth opens across time and space because the flesh of the world as Merleau-Ponty has described it in the "Chiasm" chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* is this kind of encroachment of all beings with other beings as following along the vectors of an ever-deepening linkage of related sense. The red described there has within it the red of the hells of fiery torment articulated throughout history, and the red

of the communist flag, because these depths of sense enfold them in unfolding as part of a dimension of the felt sense of red (*Visible* 132). Similarly, in front of Van Gogh's painting emerges a "place" that encompasses an indeterminate number of spaces of all the joy of farming, the dread of lonely artists, writers, and broken-hearted lovers, the somberness of those watching dark sunsets, the peace of walking through muddy fields, the disappointment of those who fail in professions like being a clergymen (as did Van Gogh), the soaring of birds, some of which fly higher or faster than crows, the coming of the dark in so many situations, and many other beings who roam similar fields. These all come together in a blaze in which none of these identities is substantially discernable, but still they all crackle, flit, and stream within the haunting of the blaze of the painting. This coming together through the interplay of difference and likeness of sense is what Merleau-Ponty means by depth.

Eye and mind are themselves enveloped in the world as movement, rhythm, and light. This is what Galen Johnson describes throughout *The Retrieval of Beauty*, in which he traces out the connection between radiance and expression of the mute voice of light and rhythm with the expression of the energy of movement by vibration. Movement by vibration and the mute voice of light are both elements of primordial depth. This primordial depth is the key to the flesh of the world, as Merleau-Ponty states in a working note of November, 1959: "It is hence because of depth that the things have a flesh" (*Visible* 219). But such a depth is also at the heart of much of what visual artists express, and especially those artists that Merleau-Ponty chose to investigate. Although these later formulations and descriptions are suggestive, I don't believe they can be understood in their full significance until we retrace Merleau-Ponty's path of thought that supports their sense. Merleau-Ponty first articulated and developed this notion of depth in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and it runs throughout that work. It is thus helpful to return to this

development of Merleau-Ponty's idea of depth and see why it leads to both the notion of flesh and the painter's expressiveness, and we will do that in the next section of this essay. Then, in the final section, we will look at the plates of the artists that Merleau-Ponty chose to accompany his discussion in "Eye and Mind" and explore whether these artists and works are not particularly focused on expressing this primordial depth.

III. The Development of Depth in Merleau-Ponty's Writings

In the chapter on "Sense Experience" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty begins establishing his own notions of perception, sense, and world, starting out with the declaration that "our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism" (*Phenomenology* 203). Having already discussed how there is a vital significance to all percepts, affective, motoric, and beckoning, and how something like the blue of the sky "thinks itself in me" as much as I approach it, here Merleau-Ponty explores the logic that "each sense" is its "own world" as having a differing spatiality (222), and yet each is interwoven inextricably with the others. This logic leads him to his first description of the eruption of the depth of space when he remarks that "music is not in visible space, but it besieges, undermines, and displaces that space, so that soon these overdressed listeners who take on a judicial air and exchange remarks or smiles, unaware that the floor is trembling beneath their feet, are like a ship's crew buffeted about on the surface of a tempestuous sea" (225). Visual space and the aural space of music both at the moment one experiences them "lay claim to total being"; both unfold our common space. The two spaces are different and yet resound within one another. Rather than a rationalized Newtonian or Cartesian or Kantian homogenous and unified space, Merleau-Ponty leads us into a space of many spaces. Their logic is like that of the relationship of the space of music and the

visual world in that “they are united at the very instant they clash” (225). This is the sense experience which is the heart of depth and its eruption into space.

In the next chapter, “Space,” Merleau-Ponty articulates further this sense of depth after he deconstructs the rationally delineated sense of an unfolding space as entailing the denial of depth. Traditionally, depth has been seen to be the result of a progression from points to other points that yield breadth or distance between them, which in turn can then lead to the projection of this breadth into another axis of space which is depth, the third dimension. This thirdness of depth is its denial, since this juxtaposition of planes is conceived as if seen from a vantage “outside” of space, and not in itself having any particular relationship among these locations; it is just an “effect” of the observer—an epiphenomenon. It is conceived as if a measurable distance could be drawn among all points within space, reducing depth to a series of lengths observed from the God’s eye perspective, while the observer stuck in one place experiences depth. The lack of relationship among locations betokens the lack of emotional attunement and existential significance of space conceived in this way. Yet according to Merleau-Ponty, these are primary vectors of directness, connectedness, orientation, rhythm, and inscription of movement. For the tradition, from the absolute (“God’s eye”) vantage, all points are on a grid externally related. Depth itself would not appear in this vision, or as Merleau-Ponty summarizes this view: “What I call depth is in reality a juxtaposition of points, making it comparable to breadth. I am simply badly placed to see it” (255). Seen in this way, we are all “badly placed” as beings caught within space and also time. It is because of our facticity, our being embodied and located within a situation, within space, that there is depth. As rooted within the specific objects, people, and events of my particular phenomenal field, I am always first “here” and drawn into depths of that into which I plunge through perception, whereas, as Merleau-Ponty phrases it, “For God, who is

everywhere, breadth is immediately equivalent to depth” (255). Assuming this perspective to be foundational, rational thought treats “depth as breadth viewed in profile, in order to arrive at a uniform space” in which “the subject must leave his place, abandon his point of view, and think himself into a sort of ubiquity” (255)—at the cost of being located nowhere. Since we are considering depth in painting, we must also stop for a moment and comment on how traditional Albertian perspective,³ which influenced all the visual arts in the West, took this rationalized equivalent of depth and operationalized it to render an abstracted depth as the standard of representation, about which there is something particularly frozen, neutral, empty, flat, uninvolved, circumscribed, if not suffocating. These centuries of “realistic rendering” of depth were like the operational thinking that Merleau-Ponty criticizes in the first two pages of “Eye and Mind” that gives us a hollowed and flattened sense of our existence. It “works” in manipulating the viewer, but displaces them from the perceptual world and embodiment, or from the flesh of the world.

For a being whose gaze and movement is a response to the world’s offer of sense, perceptual faith that seeks an unfolding of situation and of the thing that is, also *draws us into depth*, since “depth is born beneath my gaze because the latter tries to see *something*” (262). In this way, the perceiver is like the artist. In quoting Cézanne in this discussion, Merleau-Ponty says we also “join the aimless hands of nature” (262). This is the same experience that Cézanne reported of being drawn further into his “motif”: we are like the artist insofar as perceptual faith moves into greater depth to uncover the sense that originally beckoned our attention. Here, Merleau-Ponty also discusses perspective drawing and denies the classical model: “the perspective drawing is not at first perceived of as a drawing on a plane surface, and then organized in depth. The lines which sweep towards the horizon are not first given as oblique, and

then thought of as horizontal” (262), despite the fact that this is the way American children are taught to draw—or, more accurately, are taught *to construct* a drawing. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the whole of the drawing strives towards its equilibrium by delving in depth” (262). If one is trying to render perspective in a drawing where “a poplar on the road ... is drawn smaller than a man,” Merleau-Ponty claims the tree “succeeds in becoming really and truly a tree only by retreating towards the horizon” (262)—that is, rather than drawing lines from the Albertian vanishing points to the tops of the trees. It is by entering the flow of forces within the landscape that perspective will be expressed spontaneously by the artist’s hand. As one enters into the interrelatedness of sense within the landscape, “it is the drawing itself which tends towards depth as a stone falls downward” (262). Later in the chapter, Merleau-Ponty will discuss how a stone falling can only be rendered in its flight by realizing how motion “inhabits the stone” (277). We no longer conceive of motion as traversing a Cartesian grid of discrete positions, since “movement does not exist between objects” (277); we rather “conceive the world which is not made up only of things, but which has in it also pure transitions” [*de pures transitions*] (*Phenomenology* 275 [*Phénoménologie* 318]). This world of pure transitions, or the motion of objects inhabited by “the particular manner of its ‘passing’” [*sa manière particulière de “passer”*] (275 [318]), is the kind of motion inscribed throughout the world that is rendered by the artist.

Merleau-Ponty brings his discussion of depth to its most pointed articulation in discussing the depth experienced in seeing a cube or even in looking at a drawing of a cube that he supplies for his reader—an example and a passage that he revisits in a working note of September, 1959. Following the logic he has been articulating, Merleau-Ponty states that rather than recognizing the depth of a cube by mentally surveying the cube from above or from

alongside it progressively and additively, or by projecting and synthesizing its ideal shape abstractly, we encounter the depth of the cube through an “animating,” “investing,” and “penetrating” gaze (*Phenomenology* 264), seeing the sides of the cubes as *faces*, as *physiognomies*. Just as the musical and the visual spaces clash as impossibles in nevertheless going together, we see through and within the faces of the cube like we see the face of another as an expression of a sense whose specific configuration is only a gateway not registered in itself towards that sense which is in this case depth. The square sides and right angles that are never accessible simultaneously in this guise are the markers of depth:

This being simultaneously present in experiences which are nevertheless mutually exclusive, this implication of one in the other, this contraction in one perceptual act of a whole possible process, constitute the originality of depth. It is the dimension in which things or elements of things envelop each other, whereas breadth and height are dimensions in which they are juxtaposed. (264-5)

It is not a collection of squares that make up the face given to us in recognizing the cube, but only an enveloping among the faces, given askew in a particular torsion within our perspective. This is like the recognition of a face of a friend in which we do not take in their particular constituent features and synthesize them; it is rather, as Merleau-Ponty says, that “I may be familiar with a face without ever having perceived the color of the eyes in themselves” (11). It is not the specific configuration objectively rendered that I perceive, but as Merleau-Ponty will say decades later of the cave paintings at Lascaux, “It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than I *see it*” (“Eye and Mind” 164). The face of the friend seen as a whole, like the cave painting or the work of an artist, is a manner of passing, of unfolding, that within its tensions and interplays is expressive of a sense that has depth.

It is the implication of one in the other of impossibles and in their contraction in one perceptual act that comprises the depth of the world which I see, feel, and can express. Notice,

however, that until now I have spoken as if depth were a spatial matter, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, it is equally, or even more so, a presentation of time. Perception shows us that we are in the world, not in a progressive and successive unfolding of time, but in a dehiscent, enjambed time. If time were merely successive, this would annihilate its depth. It takes time to experience depth, for like space, it is a process that folds back on itself and its aspects, creating interplays of sense. Depth is within time as an envelopment, just as Merleau-Ponty explains in *The Visible and the Invisible* that the criss-crossing, the enlacing of hands, or of presences with others, is an overlapping that forms within time where the failures to be superimposed become instead the “shifting,” “spreading,” and enveloping among the chiasmatic partners (148). Depth is the being within moments that are enjambed, that contain within them resonances of times out of joint, clashing moments, as well as unfolding ones, that all pile up in the encounter with the face of things and the world. Rather than a linear progressive process, Merleau-Ponty even in the *Phenomenology* says there is this contraction, this density of time. This foreshadows what he will later say of the voluminosity of space, in which myriad times appear within a time, even though this undermines the logically ordered world of the traditional Enlightenment ways of conceiving of both time and space. It is why Merleau-Ponty is caught in the contradiction between the trajectory of his description in the *Phenomenology* that is leading him towards a more radical sense of time, and his still holding onto Husserl’s too unified and successive sense of time. Later, he will criticize and go beyond Husserl’s analyses in working out the ramifications of a depth of time.⁴

Merleau-Ponty by the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception* declares that “time is someone ... we must understand time as the subject and the subject as time”; the overlapping within time brings forth what was implied but not yet is, but comes to suddenly emerge in “that

one single explosion [*un seul éclatement*] or thrust [*ou une seule poussée*] which is subjectivity itself" (422). In other words, the traditional position of "the subject" has given way in Merleau-Ponty's articulation to a temporal depth that escapes both the traditional and even the Husserlian conception. Here, near the end of the *Phenomenology*, subjectivity has been radically decentered into the world as a depth of time. The sense of this emergent time is that of "a single explosion." These words foreshadow his formulation of the enlacement of the visible and vision, and the artist and the world, in the act of expression as that deflagration between perceiver and world in "Eye and Mind." In the working notes, the necessary reconception of time to fit this notion of depth occurs explicitly, as Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl's notion of time "as without thickness," as insufficiently open to Being (*Visible* 173), as articulating neither the "discontinuities" within time, nor the present as "an encompassing." What was missing in Husserl's analyses are the very hallmarks of a depth of time for Merleau-Ponty. As he states in the working notes, it is necessary to understand "time as chiasm" in which "a point of time can be transmitted to the others without 'continuity'" (267). The "present" of time can't be placed on a schema like Husserl's diagram of time, because it is more of a dimensionality than a temporal "location." As the dimension of dimensions, depth becomes an ongoing emergence of "an ever new," an "always the same," a transcendence of the "past present distinction" such that "the visible landscape under my eyes is not exterior to, and bound synthetically to ... other moments of time and the past, but has them really *behind itself* in simultaneity, inside itself and not it and they side by side 'in' time" (267). The flesh as the reversibility and intertwining of perceiver and perceived is this depth of time, this single temporal wave (*Phenomenology* 331). It is also the enjambment of many times in simultaneity, and is expressed by the artist, such as in Cézanne's renderings of Mt. St. Victoire that vibrate and resonate with other showings forth, vantages, moments of the artist's expression,

other painters' works, other rhythms of appearing at other times in differing lights, clouds, seasons, etc. This is an enjambling of time just as it is in the cave paintings of Lascaux, which contain the winter's starvation of animals looking for food, hunters equally desperate for food, days of vitality and roaming the landscape in strength and power, and so many moments of these animals and men that are all presented in that place of myriad places, as myriad times come to shine forth at one time on a cave wall.

In September, 1959, when Merleau-Ponty decides to "take up again the analysis of the cube," he repeats much of the same idea about depth and the same critique of the traditional view, as he had written in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but he further emphasizes how the perceiver doesn't have a view on the cube, as much as the intertwining of the visible and vision is "an encroachment" upon the perceiver. It is for flesh "that there can be a cube itself which closes the circuit and completes my being seen" (*Visible* 202). There is a Cézanne as being taken up into Mt. St. Victoire or a Van Gogh as waved by the crows and the wheat field such that "it is hence finally the massive unity of Being as encompassing of myself and of the cube" (202-203). The perceiver and the cube, Cézanne and Mt. St. Victoire as rendered by him, emerge from a depth that in this note Merleau-Ponty also calls "the wild, non-refined, 'vertical' Being that makes there be a cube" (203). The encompassing, the vertical Being, are ways of expressing how there is a global locality, an enjambment of time, a criss-crossing of differing registers of taking in the world. Among those are the perceivers with the things of the world—primordial depth. This might make us think back to Merleau-Ponty's first striking example in the *Phenomenology of Perception* of everyday perception of the Muller-Lyer lines that are both the same length and not (6), or of the parallel lines sweeping into the distance which never touch and also do touch

each other in the distance (36). This is the presence of depth—a kind of use of line and figuration that the artists Merleau-Ponty admires will render in their work.

To return to our discussion of “Eye and Mind,” after discussing Lascaux and the “imaginary texture of the real” (165), Merleau-Ponty invokes Rembrandt’s painting, “The Night Watch,” and points out that “the spatiality of the captain lies at the meeting place of two lines of sight which are impossibles and yet together” (165). This echoes his definition of depth in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but here he further articulates this depth as the way in which he alludes to an invisibility that “rests upon a total visibility which is to be re-created” by the artist such that it “liberates the phantoms captive in it” (167). The going together of impossibilities is not a defect of the artist’s expression, but a way to bring forth from depth the invisible sense of things. Merleau-Ponty concludes this section of the essay by naming painting as an “oneiric universe”—the same phrase he uses to describe the animal’s sense of the world that draws it beyond the merely present towards a sense that at least verges on the symbolic or virtual or is approaching the invisible (*Nature* 193-5). Merleau-Ponty characterizes this oneiric universe of painting as marked by the going together of the “imaginary and real, visible and invisible, the mixing of all categories” (“Eye and Mind” 169). These are the joined impossibles that are a depth rendered by the artist, and into which we enter as perceivers of the work.

Merleau-Ponty states later in the essay that “either what I call depth is nothing, or else it is my participation in a Being without restriction, a participation primarily in the being of space beyond every (particular) point of view. Things encroach upon one another *because each is outside of the others*” (“Eye and Mind” 173). The crows in Van Gogh’s painting we considered earlier are only what they are in that deep blue darkening sky riddled with the black bursting clouds as also interwoven with the waving wheat. Also, the waving wheat is only what it is under

that sky and filled with those crows and cut by those angled paths. The viewer entering into the depth of the painting becomes a person “crowed” and “criss-crossed” and “wheat-bent-winded” in a myriad of encroachments that it would take hours to incompletely sketch in discursive language, but is *felt* in the draw of the painting upon the senses. Our participation in Being is the way that the flesh of the world is envelopment. This is a being beyond boundaries in a circulation of sense that replaces the Renaissance sense of depth in art as rendered from “outside,” from a God’s eye perspective, with a depth as a bursting forth from within the encroachment of things upon one another. A deflagration is from within, bursting in and through others. Even movement understood exclusively as the motion through isolated points of space in a Cartesian grid can only be rendered by the artist through “an image in which the arms, the legs, the trunk and the head are each taken at a different instant ... this mutual confrontation of impossibles” (“Eye and Mind” 185), as Merleau-Ponty cites Rodin. Or in other words, movement is rendered only within a depth of time, the time of enjambment. Yet, the artist does not only portray movement as propulsion through Cartesian space encompassing a certain time. Within things, landscapes, and every being as expressing a sense enmeshed with other beings, there is the movement expressed by an artist when he or she makes the first line on a canvas—“a certain disequilibrium” (*Visible* 184). From out of an open, unmarked field, the work of art unfolds; it jostles and circulates and penetrates and caresses and touches and flees into evanescence. It is a moving blaze of forces or what Merleau-Ponty calls “a movement by vibration or radiation” (184). Even the rendering of the face of the stillest person, the most stable rock, or a deer pausing to listen, as immobile as possible, still radiates waves of expression from its visage that themselves are a disequilibrium. They move the world towards senses other than what has been.

The artist renders this expressiveness of visages of the myriad beings in response to their beckoning.

The painter shows us depth, as taken beyond himself or herself, in rendering the envelopment of every being in its dehiscence—its being broken open towards the world such that I am of the crow's vision as much as I see it and fly its shaken path as it flies against the wind in a reversibility that constantly moves. This is what comprises *passage* within a time enjambed with whispered histories that have resided within the silence of sense, yet now resound and echo myriad trajectories. These trajectories will emerge as having been, even if never yet before present, since they come from depths just becoming sounded through this expression. This is why, as noted above, Merleau-Ponty has been led to declare in "Eye and Mind" that if depth were to be considered a dimension it would have to be said to be *the first one*—the primordial dimension from which others emerge. Within depth, these primal presences are emergent and come to have been always present, even if only now coming into expression. Yet, the most apt formulation is the one we also discussed previously, i.e., that depth is "the reversibility of dimensions of a 'global locality'—everything in the same place at the same time" (*Visible* 180). This is why in some sense, the entire history of painting is already contained within the figures at Lascaux, but equally so in other art works. This is not in some abstract sense of pantheistic logic that all is in all, but rather in the sense of myriad lines of interconnection, enfolding within one another in unfolding. This sense gives to each work a distinctive expression unlike any other and yet renders it inseparable from the others. We must take caution, however, of Merleau-Ponty's emphatic warning: "there is no master key of the visible" (181). As much as depth is at the heart of the flesh of the world and at the core of the expressive lives of the artists from whom Merleau-

Ponty sought inspiration, we cannot subsume all art's expression to depth and forget color, light, silence, and other dimensions of sense and expression with differing eyes and minds.

IV. Depth in Artworks of the Silent Essay Before and With “Eye and Mind”

Realizing that this reconception of depth is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's indirect ontology of the flesh, and given that he came to see depth as revealed most powerfully in the work of artists, we can return to look at the artworks that were placed at the beginning of the Gallimard edition of “Eye and Mind.” If the premise of this essay holds, Merleau-Ponty chose them because, in placing them as the virtual entranceway into “Eye and Mind,” they both expressed and evoked this sense of depth. The question is whether we can see in them the kind of depth that Merleau-Ponty expressed as key to art's power.⁵

In Alberto Giacometti's *Portrait d'Aimé Maeght*—the first work chosen by Merleau-Ponty to introduce “Eye and Mind”—the subject of the portrait sits in a moment of pause like those to which we just alluded. A volume held open in his hands, staring out ahead of himself, the man seems to have a set expression, perhaps of determination, of thinking through what he is reading, or perhaps looking up with attention at someone before him. Or perhaps he is just a rather unmoved and unmoving person at this stage in his life. It might seem a strange choice to preface an essay that prioritizes the artist's expression as deflagration, as fire, as unending movement by vibration, as depth, since we see little behind or around the seated and seemingly stolid man other than his torso and the book. Even the desk and background are barely suggested. The first striking aspect of Giacometti's drawings is, however, like Cézanne's paintings, that outlines appear only in multiplicities of vibrating lines, as sketchy, incomplete, suggestive. They can only outline by rendering outlines as moving, blurring, open to what is around them, as lines

of force and ambiguity. While they almost remind us of the lines of the Futurists that are blatantly expressive of these explosively moving forces in the everyday, Giacometti's work is much more subtle and suggestive. This seated man seems almost as close as we might get to a human rendition of a seated block of wood or stone, and yet ... Even here, the facial expression, for all its lack of emotional vivacity, has a density that we can't help being drawn into, of perhaps a pensiveness about the book, or about life, or about resignation, or maybe also about the strivings of a person who seeks to present himself as solid, a solid citizen, as substantial. But he can't achieve this like a stone does; he presents only as an ongoing striving with contradictions. This presence of the solid person, sketchily outlined, seems purposely simple and as if reduced to the bare minimum, yet that is the project of so much of the art of the twentieth century: to reduce the things of the world to simple surfaces, and simple objects and lines, that nonetheless still express through a felt tension the excess of moving forces that spill over the surfaces from some inner dynamism. Within these important, seemingly impossible dualities of art—like surface and depth, or the still and the dynamic—is yet another form of apparent impossibilities going together as depth. The seated man looks right at us and engages us in an interplay of regards that has no easy closure. He seems stolid, and yet as more lines and darker shading converge around his eyes and mouth, there is a compelling quality to his facial expression, which seems still and resigned, and yet at the same time intense and vibrant, like his hands before him, at peace, yet restless. It is this tension of depth's impossibilities that pulls us into this drawing with a force that most sketches seem to lack in their seemingly flatter presence.

Turning to Merleau-Ponty's choice of Paul Klee's, *Park near Lucerne*, I'd like to quote Galen Johnson's assessment of this work in his *Retrieval of the Beautiful*. Johnson describes Klee's sense of a mortal beauty as one that in the face of death finds an "ever-new" within the

density of time, and retains a humor and musicality in art's creation, despite facing finitude. Johnson's comment on *Park near Lucerne* suggests that "as a pictographic painting that can be read as the map of a park or read more figuratively as a park with its bending trees, soccer balls and soccer player, a visitor on a park bench, and those playful eyes directly in the center looking out at us," it is a painting "overflowing with a sense of joy, generosity and hope" (Johnson 124), more akin to Merleau-Ponty's tone of philosophizing than Klee's darker vision. In line with Merleau-Ponty's more celebratory vision, Johnson feels that that the "concentration of growth" in the little tree in the center is a key to Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of the canvas. However, if—as we have just discussed—depth is more important to Merleau-Ponty as the key to art's power, he might have chosen this painting because this "concentration of growth" is found in the midst of branchings that seem to be lifeless and break off in dead-ends throughout the virtual space of the park. It may be possible, in addition to Johnson's observations, to see in this canvas a kind of profusion in which there are continuous breaks as well with patches of color that alternately stand forth with vital and radiant energy, but also equally misfire and draw us down and into a depth with more somber colors. The branching lines are ambiguous in their thick blackness; they can stand out as growth, but are also like cracks or fissures that undermine the playful surface of the park. The smiling eyes are equally a bit lost from another perspective, split by a line that seems to put them a bit at odds rather than unifying them in an eyeful smile. Those possible soccer players who would be together despite their spread as part of a game, might be humans somewhat lost and isolated in this blackened line maze of a space. They might be seen as cut off from each other by those lines as a profusion of barriers. The tree at the center might be a concentration of growth moving outward to infuse the rest with life; alternatively, it might be a tree still denser with vegetation and life than the stark trees around it, but one that is isolated

there, unable to connect to the rest of the landscape. So doomed from expansion and expression of its vitality, it curves back into itself, as its branches and fruits also appear. It, too, could be seen as hemmed in by the lines surrounding it, instead of open to earth, sky, and growth. It seems that both of these registers might exist in this painting—just as Van Gogh’s wheat field evokes both a more obvious somber feeling and equally a vitality that the viewer can sense in tension with it. In Klee’s painting, the more obvious initial sense might be carefree, but in looking more closely, a tension with a more forlorn undertone might mark the kind of depth that would fit with the artist’s “mortal beauty.” This might also fit with a sensibility of Merleau-Ponty that is not quite so straightforwardly joyous, as symbolized by his statement that each “sensation is a birth and a death” (*Phenomenology* 216). By understanding the key role of depth in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, we may come to see his vision as more complicated and having a darker underside that makes his optimistic, celebratory sense an achievement in the face of loss and fragility.



FIGURE 2. Paul Klee, *Parc near Lucerne*, 1938. Forward of “Eye and Mind” (author’s digital reproduction, in public domain)

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty might have included *Park near Lucerne* as part of his silent introduction to the essay so that his readers could learn to see that there might be a depth of impossibles even in what might appear at a quick glance to be carefree; once one stops and pauses, one sees simultaneously the dark undertones beneath.

If we look at Rodin's *Crouching Woman* and its pairing with Richier's equally crouching woman, *The Leaper*, we find statues that present the body, and, especially given the history of European art, the female body, in an unusual pose. She is neither languid nor in repose, nor standing open and available to the viewer—especially the male viewer. Both women are instead coiled in trajectories of motion. Rodin's figure is actually wrenching away from any possible viewer. She is more earthbound, more connected to what is below, than is typical for vertical sculpted figures. However, like the Richier figure, as much as she is presently crouched into the ground in a way that almost seeks it as refuge, one would not be surprised to see her whip her head around and leap upwards. She is at rest, but motion is also present throughout her body. As Galen Johnson puts it, "the elongation of the right arm wrapped around the figure's chest clasping her left leg as she crouches gives the figure the sensation of a turning spinning movement" (73). Rest and motion, squatting down into and exploding upwards—these impossibles are the expression of depth in Merleau-Ponty's sense. Not only are pairs of impossibles present in her embodiment, but her posture's message to the viewer seems to be a similar coming together of impossibles. As Johnson continues: "The movement is a gesture towards the world in the lower part of the body that shows the woman's vulnerability and at the same time a covering up in the upper body, a mobile intentionality that prevents a static, frozen posture" (73). This movement by vibration is also essential to expressing depth, as the impossibles are made to dance within each other, not stand in static opposition. Johnson also

points out the efforts made by Rodin to alter the usual patina to be more of an “unpredictable allocation of color accents, irregular in intensity and shape” (73). I agree with Johnson’s



FIGURE 3: Auguste Rodin, *Femme Accroupi*, 1882. Forward, “Eye and Mind,” (author’s digital reproduction, in public domain).

argument in the rest of the chapter that Rodin’s work is marked by the enjambment in time of differing moments that gives his figures such movement, and, moreover, that he combines what is thought of as the beautiful and the sublime in one work. We can see aspects of these characteristics in this work chosen by Merleau-Ponty, aspects that are expressions of depth in their coming together. Richier’s *Leaper* differs in emphasis, as she is clearly about to leap up, out, and into the world, but at

this moment she is still coiled back into her body. Her own power of solid connection comes from the earth, almost like Antaeus whose strength came from contact with his mother Gaia. The *Leaper* pauses to draw this strength up, into her body. In some ways, she seems more open to the viewer, but the incline of her shoulders towards her belly, the gaze of her head emerging clearly from her own stored, coiled, spring, the downward tilt of her hands, as if also drawing up the earth’s energies, give her that simultaneous sense of self-possession, as well as openness to the world. Motion and rest, openness and closure, leaping upward and drawing downward, fragility

and strength—again we see a similar coming together of impossibles that marks these works as being works of depth in Merleau-Ponty’s sense.

Finally, Matisse’s intriguing drawing of *The Bather with Long Hair* invites us to say more about Merleau-Ponty’s comments on the achievement of Matisse’s distinctive line. In the essay, he posits the double nature traced out by Matisse’s lines—the “prosaic signification [*signalement prosaïque de l’être*]” (*L’Œil et l’esprit* 75) of the line’s rendering, as well an evocation of the “hidden” [*sourde*] operation” that composes the forces that one may say are invisible, and that give its fuller sense as what it is (*Visible* 184). Merleau-Ponty is here discussing the line not as a tracing through Cartesian space, but as a setting into disequilibrium the forces that manifest themselves in the way something comes forward, the way something becomes itself in being manifested. This is an evocation that Merleau-Ponty says applies particularly to Matisse’s drawings of women. He also says of Matisse’s line that it “taught us to see their contours not in a ‘physical-optical’ way but rather as structural filaments [*des nervures*], as the axes of a corporeal system of passivity and activity” (*Visible* 184). If we look at the bather with these comments in mind, it is striking how on the one hand she is in a flattened space of the water under the leaves of a tree. Yet, at the same time, to see her as suspended within the flows of water that seem as extensive as the earth and the air, as rising up towards the sky, she seems to emerge from a great depth. Even her body seems drawn down into the water—and yet it is also rising up with her arm and hair towards the leaves and sky. There is something about Matisse’s drawing that seems so utterly simple, like a child’s. Yet, the quality of the line suggests a complexity of the spirit, of the invisible, in how our body meshes with water and trees, sky, and the deepest horizons of the world. Again, as Galen Johnson suggests, there is something about

his line and his drawing that seems to reach into all times (171), like the Lascaux cave drawings, while also seemingly evoking one simple present moment of action.

This reverberating quality can be seen to be like Merleau-Ponty's *movement by vibration* and the depth it opens. There is also the twinning of activity and passivity that evokes the greatest depth where our actions are surely at once the spontaneous upsurge of our personal action at the moment, as well as a resonance with the depth of time. Here, our lives join the one single temporal wave of the lives of humanity submerged within the life of the planet in its geological time. Eye and mind have emerged from this level of depth, not only through the human activity on the planet, but also through our interanimality and our reversibility with myriad other beings. It is for the reader to judge whether these works of art evoke this displacement into a time and space that encompass more than the time of the creation of the work of art, or of the time it depicts, or of our own time in looking at the work, or of other times where kindred and enveloping senses blazed forth in beings who link up with those depicted through the magic of vision. For Merleau-Ponty, such a displacement can be a way of entering into a dimension of beings whose linked sense is not an association of a distanced mind, but rather an enfolding of their beings within the tissue of the flesh of the world, and in our embodiment. This felt sense, with its vectors of kinship and difference, its displacement and yet a return to oneself enriched in meaning, is the blaze that moves up the arm of the artist and expressively renders the world.

Notes

¹ “In search of depth Cézanne seeks this deflagration of Being, and it is in all modes of space, in form as much as anything” (Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” 180).

² “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings ... that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement ... The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being” (Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” 162).

³ Albertian perspective, most famously described by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in *On Painting*, is a mathematical and geometrical rendering of space such that it gives the illusion of depth of field by tracing out as straight lines the “rays of vision” from the painter’s perspective as seen through an imaginal window opened onto the scene depicted, through a horizon line to a vanishing point to which all the rays are connected. It makes depth into a purely uniform and rational construction that can be achieved using a drafting grid and drawing as many straight lines to the vanishing point (or points) as needed to guide the rest of the sketched planes of the drawing.

⁴ For an essay devoted to the stages of Merleau-Ponty’s abandonment of Husserl’s analysis of time, see Mazis, “Time at the Depth of the World” (2010).

⁵ I omit the Cézanne canvas from this discussion, since so much has been written about the parallels of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas and Cézanne’s painting, starting with Merleau-Ponty’s own analyses, which I could not surpass.

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