

Merleau-Ponty's Somaesthetics

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- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Œuvres* is a wonderfully useful compendium for all readers interested in the philosopher's major ideas, but perhaps especially for those interested in his contribution to aesthetics and philosophy of art. A voluminous (almost 1850-page) collection, it contains complete versions of major works such as *Humanisme et terreur : essai sur le problème communiste*, *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, *La Prose du monde*, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, *L'Œil et l'esprit*, but also judiciously selected articles from *Sens et non-sens* and *Signes*, including « Le Doute de Cézanne ». This book is further enriched by his 1951 *Projet d'enseignement* au Collège de France, the letters relating to his rupture with Jean-Paul Sartre in 1953, a glossary of Latin, Greek, and German terms he used, and Claude Lefort's excellent preface (reprinted from his 1974 article on Merleau-Ponty). A special treat is the addition of a detailed yet elegant chronology of the philosopher's life and works, punctuated with unpublished citations from radio interviews and delightfully illustrated with many personal photos of Merleau-Ponty and his intimate circle. The book thus provides a rare glimpse into the life of a philosopher who resolutely shunned personal self-exposure from the media and from biographers. It is a pleasure, at least for me, to see this philosopher of the body not only impeccably dressed with suit and tie at his study in Paris but also sunning himself bare-chested and bare-legged on a balcony near Saint-Tropez.
- 2 Merleau-Ponty's most important contribution to philosophy has been the revalorizing of the body as the central medium of all perception, action and even thought. This insight has obvious epistemological, metaphysical, and sociopolitical implications which he skillfully developed, but I focus here on his significance for philosophy of art and aesthetics. Two points seem paramount. First, revalorizing the body means revalorizing the bodily senses, and this in turn means returning aesthetics to its original

(Baumgartian) conception as a science of sensory perception. If aesthetics, in modernity, has most often been pursued as a theory of beauty, of taste, of aesthetic judgment, or, especially since Hegel, as a philosophy of fine art, then Merleau-Ponty's insistence on "the primacy of perception" reminds us of the root-meaning of aesthetics in the Greek word for sensory perception—aesthesis (αἴσθησις).

- 3 Our judgments of taste, ideas of beauty, aesthetic experiences and understandings of fine art all depend on our capacities to perceive; and these perceptual capacities (including emotional and cognitive perception) depend on the body and its capacities of movement, sensation and feeling, not only through the body's traditional five senses but also through its powers of proprioception and kinaesthesia. No longer merely a mechanical tool that the artist uses to give external form to his vision, the body is also the indispensable perceptual medium through which he knows the world (of which his body is a visible part) and through which he achieves his artistic vision. "The painter takes his body with him," but this body is "not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement." Vision depends on the perceiving "mobile body" not only because the body's location presents the structuring point for vision's spatial field (its directions of up and down, left and right, front and back) but also because the body's powers of locomotion are what enable us to perceive distance and depth, just as its powers of touch enable our seeing the texture of an object even before we touch it.
- 4 Perception is thus essentially transmodal because its medium is the multisensory dynamic soma. As vision is the perceptual modality that haunted Merleau-Ponty's philosophical imagination (he died with René Descartes' treatise on vision opened on his desk), so painting is the art to which he devoted most attention. But his insight into perception's somatic nature is easily applied to other arts, just as recognizing its sensory transmodality can encourage artistic strategies of mixed media. Sculpture and architecture cannot be properly perceived without the body's moving around or through their works, and the full appreciation of their aesthetic qualities depends on subtle somatic sensations of touch, kinaesthesia, and proprioception that cannot be properly represented in visual or conceptual terms. In giving primacy to perception, Merleau-Ponty liberates philosophy of art from the grip of Hegelian idealism that privileged the conceptual (hence literature) and the expression of transcendental truths through mediated reflection. He returns us to the pleasures of sensory perception and the beauty of the sensible world of immediate experience while showing us that there is not only aesthetic richness but also metaphysical depth to be grasped in that world.
- 5 Through the primacy of somatic perception, aesthetics is likewise liberated from the narrowing grip of fine art, so that contemporary aesthetic inquiry can focus on artistic practices of popular culture and design that serve or stylize the body, and even on the self-stylizing subject's art of living. If Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly advocate this expansion of the aesthetic field, his work has certainly encouraged it, just as his somatic advocacy inspires the body's thematized use in contemporary performance art. This introduces the second major dimension where his contemporary influence is powerfully positive but needs further development. His reinterpretation of the body as perceiving subjectivity and visible object in the world should spur us to improve the body's skills of perception for both appreciating and creating art by training our body consciousness, but also to invent a richer palette of aesthetic images of bodily beauty than society's current stereotypes provide. This twofold task is the aim of my project of somaesthetics.