

Preface

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In March 2008, at Sofia University, Professors Ivan Kolev and Duane H. Davis organized a centenary celebration of Merleau-Ponty's birth. The conference attracted a wide range of speakers from many countries, including some who have contributed to this volume. They explored the philosopher's views on perception, the body, art, science, and truth. In his remarks, Professor Kolev noted that, in "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty, citing Heidegger, writes about the "uncontemplated" that each thought outlines. That "uncontemplated" is a possibility and generates a task (S, 160/202).¹ Furthermore, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a text substantially influenced by Heidegger, the author speaks about the "internal armature" of the visible (149/195). What belongs to that "internal armature" is "the possible which is not a shadow of the actual, but is its principle" (ibid., 152/199). That "internal armature" is the invisible in the visible, its "lining and depth" (Proust) (ibid., 149/195), its inherent and overwhelming meaningfulness that calls forth its creative expression across all levels of culture.

Merleau-Ponty's early and later works both stress the bodily foundation of this articulation of meaning, Professor Kolev continued. Whereas the early writings focus on the lived body's "I can" as powers for exploration and comprehension of the world and other people, the later texts take up these corporeal powers in the articulation of the chiasmic reversibility of flesh, to which we shall return in a moment. Kolev went on to discuss Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of Dasein's possibilities by striving to disclose "a

1. Throughout this volume, when dual pagination is provided for Merleau-Ponty's texts, the English page number(s) will precede the original(s) and they will be separated by a "/". The editions of *Signs* cited in this Preface are, respectively, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, trans. Richard C. McCleary; and Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

phenomenon that shows itself.” With regard to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, he continued, it is art, especially painting, that makes up one of the phenomena that most evidently disclose themselves and that most clearly reveal the structure and possibilities of the flesh. In art, as both *poesis* and *contemplatio*, we see clearly that Possibilia constitute the metaphysical core of human existence. The essays that comprise this book articulate those possibilities.

In Part One of this volume, this Preface and the subsequent discussions of the art of perception and the relationship of art and science lay a foundation for the particular interpretations of art and perception in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that follow in Part Two. Duane H. Davis’s “The Art of Perception” closely follows Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development from his early to last texts. Davis’s aim is to show that, at all stages along the philosopher’s way, perception and art are so intimately intertwined and reversible that his view of perception is his account of art and vice versa. William S. Hamrick’s “Concluding Scientific Postscript” converges on this thesis by showing that, contrary to the manner in which Merleau-Ponty contrasts science and art, they are more alike than the philosopher believed them to be.

Merleau-Ponty uses “reversibility” interchangeably with “chiasm,” derivative from the Greek letter χ . Thus, the title of what proved to be the last chapter of the unfinished manuscript, *The Visible and the Invisible*, is “Intertwining—The Chiasm” (*L’entrelacs—le chiasme*). He arrived at this fundamental structure of flesh from at least three different sources, and it is significant for this volume that one of them was literary. It consists of the rhetorical figure in which the word order in the first part of two-part unit—say, a verse or sentence—is inverted in the second part. For this meaning, Merleau-Ponty is mainly indebted to Paul Valéry.² However, the poet himself applied the chiasm to perception and intercorporeity as the reversibility of self and other—as did Merleau-Ponty later.³

2. As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert points out, Merleau-Ponty first uses “chiasm” in “L’homme et l’adversité” (1951) (S 231/293). *Le Scénario cartésien, Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l’intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2005), 169 (referred to hereafter as “ESA”). The term also appears at RC, 14/25, but with only a brief reference to the passage cited from Valéry quoted in full at S, 231–32/293–94.

3. For Valéry’s text, see his *Choses tues*, VI, *Tel Quel*, I, in *Œuvres*, Vol. II, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 490–91 (ESA, 170, n. 1). In Merleau-Ponty’s unpublished *Être et monde*, he again refers to Valéry as follows: “Thought = ‘to mix oneself up with some object’ and to be astonished at this confusion (*Mon Faust*): “La pensée = ‘se confondre à quelque objet’ et s’étonner de cette confusion (*Mon Faust*)” (ESA, 51), referring to Valéry’s *Mon Faust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 50.

The other two sources for the notion of chiasm are, first, physiological structures that intersect and cross over. The most common example, and one with which Merleau-Ponty was much taken, is the optic chiasm—the brain structure in which the two optic nerves intersect and at which half of the fibers of each nerve cross over to the other hemisphere. Second, he also used this structure as an analogue for the experience of touching and touched, which appears in several essays in Part Two of the present volume. The source for that sense of reversibility is Edmund Husserl's *Ideas II*, § 36. The latter pointed out that our experience of our own bodies is one of a sensory reflection. When one hand touches, say, another hand, the subjective body feels part of itself as object. Touching becomes touched. However, when the experience is reversed, the touched hand changes into a hand touching the previously touching one, which is now the touched. Merleau-Ponty's later published as well as unpublished texts reveal that this is how he began to think of the chiasm before generalizing it as one of the central meanings of flesh itself.

In 1993, there appeared what was and remains the most significant collection of Merleau-Ponty's writings about aesthetics and philosophy, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Galen Johnson. That volume contains Michael B. Smith's welcome retranslations of Merleau-Ponty's major writings on aesthetics—"Cézanne's Doubt," "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," and "Eye and Mind"—explanatory essays by the editor himself, and a number of interpretive, critical essays. All of the latter, with the exception of a well-known letter from René Magritte to Alphonse de Waelhens, come from the pens (or keyboards) of theoreticians instead of practicing artists. By contrast, the contributors to this book include not only philosophers, but also professionals in the fields of painting, photography, and architecture. All of these essays consist of particular illustrations and interpretations in different media of the reversibility of art and perception.

That diversity is immediately apparent in "Cohesion and Expression: Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne," by Jessica Wiskus. She follows the significant alteration in emphasis on depth in Merleau-Ponty's writings, and shows that "it comes to inform the way that Merleau-Ponty approaches other artistic questions articulated through the paintings of Cézanne—questions of movement, color, and style." Depth, in fact, "serves as a model through which Merleau-Ponty understands the notion of expression itself. This is singularly important for the latter because his philosophy is, from one end to the other, one of creative expression. Hence, there is a unity of style permeating all forms of expression, just as for Cézanne. As Wiskus phrases it, "There is a depth to his work through all canvases, as an orientation to painting—a resonance, an artistic movement, or a style. Thus the expression

of a painter is not contained within some material work: his work, rather, coheres through (but in some way beyond) these canvases, as a style identifiable only in retrospect.” The work of expression develops according to “a temporal dimension of depth”—in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “a sort of existential eternity” (IP, 49/87).

As a musicologist, Wiskus writes about a philosopher, Merleau-Ponty who, in turn, writes about the painter, Cézanne. Marta Nijhuis’s essay, “Echoes of Brushstrokes,” inverts that order. She is a painter writing about her own creations in the light of a philosopher. She states that her own work and her readings of Merleau-Ponty have always run on parallel paths until this essay when she speaks of her art in relation to the latter’s philosophy. She specifies that she does not seek to represent the philosopher in her paintings or to claim that his work is the “inspiring motif” of her own, but rather to create a dialogue between the two. On her view, philosophy maintains a dialogue with all artistic media.

To create this dialogue, she repairs to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of a particular “image of thought,” an “opening of a crack from which we are enabled to see the world differently.” The connection between art and philosophy does not teach us “a mere transposition of thought into image, but rather the discovery of a certain ‘image of thought’” (Deleuze). This constitutes “the inauguration of a new horizon of sense filling the world with an unexpected atmosphere-color, a new disposition of the eye and the mind at once.” Behind this communicability between different forms of expression and fields of study lies “that invisible background embracing all things that Merleau-Ponty calls flesh.” Magritte was partially correct, she goes on to say, that “our thought comprehends both: the visible and the invisible. And I use painting in order to make the thought become visible.” This is a perception that echoes Oscar Wilde’s pronouncement that what drives a painter to paint is the determination “to give visibility to an invisible.” Nevertheless, Nijhuis sides with Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that there is an invisibility and mystery about the world that can never be made visible. She also explores, with reference to Deleuze, the notion of contingency in artistic creation and the role of the body that painting “echoes.” Part of this investigation consists of the exploration of symbols, and this leads her back to Baudelaire’s poem, “*Correspondances*,” discussed by Walter Benjamin and, in this volume, by Duane Davis.

Images comprise the central topic of Sara J. Northerner’s essay, “From Edmund Husserl’s *Image Consciousness* to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Flesh and Chiasm: The Phenomenological Essence of Image*.” This paper presents certain philosophical concepts from Edmund Husserl and explores Merleau-Ponty’s

phenomenological project as rendered in a series of large-scale photographic artworks. As a visual artist, she discloses the possibilities of Husserl's image-consciousness as perceived through Merleau-Ponty's notion of the embodied viewer in intimate communion with the world. The overwhelming size of the photographic pieces, physical characteristics within the artwork, and corporeal relationship required for the viewing of an image, comprehensively emphasize the phenomenological theories as exemplified and illuminated by the artwork.

Northerner's artwork realizes photographically the diverse structures of a contemporary image-consciousness as detailed in Husserl's theories of the constitution of an object and his specific work with image-consciousness. His sketches, collected works, and lectures provide a foundation of knowledge beyond traditional and contemporary photographic theory. Furthermore, she holds, Merleau-Ponty's writings on phenomenology, perception, embodiment, and the visible/invisible, have strengthened her ability to create diverse structures of meaning in images throughout an installation of the artwork. His ideas of body schema, flesh, and chiasm are directly incorporated into the physical reality and aesthetic experience of her work. Within the photographic image and body of work, the deciphering of both image-consciousness and an aesthetic experience becomes a dialogue of flesh where all forms of perception intertwine. Through image, light, and translucency, the texture of the world visually makes itself known within the aesthetic, perceptual encounter with these specific images.

Bryan E. Norwood's essay, "Carnal Language and the Reversibility of Architecture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Signs," turns our attention from photographic images to the linguistic intelligibility of a considerably different artistic medium. For modernist architects, language is extra-referential: it is indexical because its meaning is the structures to which it refers. For postmodern architects, language is infra-referential as a semiotics of signs: "all buildings and architectural elements act as signs" of themselves only. Postmodern architects, therefore, attempt to extract meaning from the "diacritical, infra-referential structure of immanent language." For modernists, therefore, meaning is transcendent, while for postmodernists it is immanent.

How can this gap between immanence and transcendence be bridged or, as Norwood puts it, "How can architecture both be about itself and about what it signifies?" With the aid of a plethora of examples, he seeks an answer in Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh to "provide a conceptual structure . . . for *reversible architecture*—an approach that aims to redefine the architectural debate on language." "Architectural signs" turn out to be "not

only ideals, but part of carnality that is able to affect and change the structure of the visible.” Language and structure are not separate and distinct; rather, what is built “is built-spoken and a witness to Being.”

In “Architecture and the Voices of Silence,” Patricia Locke continues Norwood’s discussion in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s 1952 article, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.” She follows the latter as its author embraced both structuralism and phenomenology in his critical analysis of André Malraux’s *musée imaginaire*, the museum without walls. In Locke’s view, “Architecture refers only tangentially to itself through symbolic forms or through self-conscious narrative.” Architecture is “more explicitly embodied” than language “because it both takes into account and creates a spatial world.” However, like language, architecture “incarnates silence” because it is not simply a record of the past, but also “presents a future for embodied beings.”

Taking as an instructive case study the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum in Long Island City, New York, Locke shows that the meaningfulness of architecture emerges in the ways that it allows human beings—through the embodied architect, the “architect-as-inhabitant”—to orient themselves according to its “multidimensional organization of space-time” while at the same time demonstrating the ability to “fold back upon its resources” to illuminate “earlier ways of perceiving space.” In both its past and future intentionalities, architecture consists of “a framing or structuring poesis that makes vivid human embodiment possible.”

A “structuring poesis” at the heart of “vivid human embodiment” lies at the heart of Duane H. Davis’s “The Philosopher of Modern Life: Baudelaire, Merleau-Ponty, and the Art of Phenomenological Critique.” In this paper, the author seeks to reveal the spirit of Charles Baudelaire that animates Merleau-Ponty’s thought. The former’s antiromantic critique of modernity, for Davis, discloses a social and political depth in the latter’s work that has not yet been fully appreciated. The large background question of Davis’s reflections posed by Baudelaire’s critique and what it reveals in Merleau-Ponty’s thought is, “What role or roles do philosophers and poets play in the critique of modernity?”

Davis approaches this question by reading Merleau-Ponty’s later thought as an “ontological appropriation” of Baudelaire’s concepts of “*réversibilité*” and “*correspondances*,” the latter being equivalent to Merleau-Ponty’s key notion of the *écart*. Acknowledging these Baudelairean aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s work reveals the latter’s “critical (social and political) horizon and has implications for our own critical situation with respect to modernity.”

Voices of silence and listening in depth have a double presence in Cheryl A. Emerson's "The Flesh Made Word: *As I Lay Dying* and Being Incarnate." The author uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment to analyze William Faulkner's darkly comic tale of a family on a fool's errand in the sweltering heat of a Mississippi summer. They are transporting the decaying corpse of their mother and wife to a family grave plot many miles distant from their home. Emerson shows that the suggested alienation of the characters, through which they seem to be establishing isolated meanings on an incoherent, exterior world, is only apparent. The reader learns that, in the novel, each character "thinks" in relationship to his or her private physical world, but one that envelops the relationship of body to natural world and the gestural language of other bodies as expressed intent, even if the transfer of that intent goes wildly wrong. Furthermore, these relationships include the decaying corpse secreting its own nonverbal language, expressing its decay and humiliation to onlookers along the burial route. The idea of intercorporeality prolongs Merleau-Ponty's concept of language as embodiment, even with the dead. This unexpected reversible illumination is Faulkner's suggestion that the reversibility of carnal and even linguistic meanings works as well (or badly) with the dead as with the living.

What Merleau-Ponty teaches Emerson is that "literature, as with all art, is intercorporeal, not only in the 'involvement and lateral rapport of characters' (NC, 51) within the text, but through the reader's involvement as well, among 'the mist' of interior monologues. Our understanding is also one of embodiment, where we perceive the interior consciousness of the characters through a transfer of our own 'body schema' onto theirs." All of the descriptions of the book's characters are enriched and become more vivid "once we return to what lies 'beneath the noise of words' (PhP, 190/214)."⁴

Returning to "what lies 'beneath the noise of words'" requires an ability to listen appreciatively to them, and listening is the central theme of Galen A. Johnson's "Listening in Depth: Reading Merleau-Ponty Alongside Nancy." Johnson reflects on Merleau-Ponty's late texts together with Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* and *Corpus* in order to produce "something like a counterpoint harmony," but with some dissonances. Merleau-Ponty uses the terms *auscultation* (listening) and *palpation* for a kind of attentive, conscious experience that is different from (mere) hearing.

For both Merleau-Ponty and Nancy, in the latter's words, listening is "an intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety." To listen is to

4. The editions cited in this Preface are, respectively, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, trans. Donald A. Landes; and Paris: Gallimard, 1945.

be on the edge of meaning and push toward it, and both prefer to conceive the philosopher as a listener rather than seer. The philosopher effects a “close transition from hearing to touching and from touching to a certain mode of seeing” without collapsing all differences between them.

Nor are they equal in their effects. As Nancy puts it in *Corpus*, “The sound that penetrates through the ear propagates throughout the entire body something of its effects, which could not be said to occur in the same way with the visual signal.” Sound can both stroke and strike us and affect the entire body.

An “auscultation or palpation in depth” that is involved in listening is also a key factor in intercorporeity and participation in community. Listening deeply touches the body/spirit that is the other. It opens one to the other through its pregnant silence. It is also essential to opening ourselves to the work of art in order to let it speak to us. Johnson notes that listening “is like an art of drawing, and in a double sense: drawing out the other at the same time as the listener is drawn into the space of the question, and it means that listening to the other also becomes a listening to oneself and a relation to oneself.” This kind of listening does not achieve a perfect concordance with the other, as there is always a difference or gap (an *écart*) between our different situations, joys, and sufferings, but it can provide enough commonality to draw us together.

Finally, Johnson discusses the connection between listening in depth and Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh as well as Nancy’s charge that that ontology is “infected with the legacy of the Christian doctrines of incarnation (the Word made Flesh) and the cross (chiasm) insufficiently deconstructed in the age of the death of God”—in other words, “onto-theology.” Nancy, by contrast, construes the body medically and technologically, “as suffering and survival, an exscription of Being—body written and imprinted from the outside rather than, or at least in addition to, signifying inscriptions written from the inside.” This is a significant difference from Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on poetry—particularly that of Paul Claudel and Paul Valéry—to offer a vision of the body and its relation to nature that is one of the fullness of silence and “listening in depth” to the world as poem and “total harmony” (Claudel).

Communicative intercorporeity and the body’s relation to nature also figure prominently in William S. Hamrick’s “Art and the Overcoming of the Discourse of Modernity.” The author sets Merleau-Ponty’s view of the body and its relationships with nature against the modernist view that descended from the Galilean-Cartesian physics. For the latter, nature is purely quantitative, all purposes and values, including the good, are exiled from it, and

this “mechanistic despiritualization” (E. A. Burt) results in nature being conceived as standing over against us as subjects or spectators. This is what Merleau-Ponty rejects as “the ontology of the object.”

Hamrick offers an aesthetic critique of all three of these modernist beliefs based on two main sources. The first is the nature and significance of art in German Romanticism, especially that of F. W. J. Schelling, who substantially influenced Merleau-Ponty. The second source is Merleau-Ponty’s own discussions of art, mainly painting, in which, as we have seen, his final and nascent ontology of flesh is situated. With regard to the latter source, the paper demonstrates different ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of modern art—discussions that “illuminate vital connections between the good, the real, and the intelligible” aid in understanding his ontology of flesh. Films, sculpture, music, painting, and poetry all exhibit the fundamental reversibility of flesh in which we are implicated in art works and they in us. As Gaston Bachelard observes of the chiasmatic experience of poetry, when a “poem possesses us entirely,” when “a single poetic image” reverberates in our souls, it “takes root in us . . . expressing us by making us what it expresses.”⁵

The article also reprises certain themes from other contributors about reversibilities in painting and architecture, in Cézanne’s search for depth, and the significance of color in that investigation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways that various artistic media reveal values, how these modes cohere with Merleau-Ponty’s early “thesis” of “the primacy of perception, and the type of humanism that Merleau-Ponty thought they made possible.”

Robert Switzer, in “Tactile Cogito: Horizons of Corporeity, Animality and Affect in Merleau-Ponty,” also uses Merleau-Ponty’s writings on the body and flesh to overcome the longstanding “philosophical idol” of the separation of mind from body (and the rest of reality), and of the superiority of the former over the latter. He wants to redeem “the place of the body at the heart of both truth and art”—i.e., to repair the “metaphysical fissure” at the heart of the “human animal.” There is an “ineliminable bond with the natural world around us—its texture and feel, the resonant sonority of its surfaces and depths—and with the animals with which, in our own animal being, we share, as Heidegger wrote, a fundamental ‘kinship.’”

5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Foreword by Etienne Gilson (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1969), xviii, xix. Published originally as *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958).

The author positions Merleau-Ponty's writings about art and the body over against Heidegger's and Hegel's reflections on artworks and aesthetic experience. As against these thinkers, Switzer demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty had no wish to attempt to bridge "metaphysical divides" between human and animal, soul and body, form and matter, the invisible and the visible. Rather, he replaced the "divide" with the notions of intertwining and chiasm—"carnal implication." A human being, and therefore the artist, is "embodied by the physical insertion of the human animal into . . . the environing natural world." The artist thus becomes a special case of what we all are—a "tactile cogito"—while art itself gets grounded not on "ideality, but on our corporeal insertion into the real, in a mutually dependent dance." Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on a tactile cogito, together with his account of "incarnate artistic realization in the work of Cézanne and others," encourages us to continue the exploration of perception "uncorrupted by dualistic metaphysical myths."

Finally, in "The Chiasm as a Virtual: A Non-Concept in Merleau-Ponty's Work (With a Coda on Theatre)," Marcello V. Rosati argues that we should think of Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher of the virtual, not because of his explicit use of the term, but rather because of its ability to articulate the meaning of the chiasm. Moreover, he advances the hypothesis that Merleau-Ponty's notion of the virtual can "resolve a theoretical problem raised by the Aristotelian concept of *dunaton*" (the possible), and which is "at the heart of the modern notion of the possible." Rosati divides the question into conflicting pre- and post-actualization possibles. To understand the former, he relies on the notion of possible worlds as developed by Saul Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*, and which, for Rosati, do not differ substantially from Leibniz's concept of possible worlds. As opposed to those possibles, those that follow actualization are dependent on the action and are, thus, not contingent. Spinoza, Hegel, and Bergson are interwoven in the author's analysis of this notion of *dunaton*, and to resolve the conflict between the two types of possibles and answer the question, How does what happens happen?, Rosati seeks a solution in the idea of the virtual.

To do this, he returns to the "plurivocity of the word *dunaton* in Aristotle's work to try to find a meaning that avoids the logical concept of the possible." The concept of *kinesis* is the desired "middle course" via which the *dunaton* achieves "tension, strength, and transition from before to after." It is "what explains the transition from past to present, from what is not yet existent to what is." The notion of transition "leads to the creation of pre-actualization before a completely novel post-actualization." This move also entails understanding the *dunaton* not as the possible, but as something virtual. Its advantage is that it can avoid the before-and-after polarity

because the “virtual and the actual constitute both parts of the real object. The virtual is an interstitial principle from which existence is produced.” The virtual is not identical with the before because it also adheres to the produced object, the after.

Further remarks on virtuality follow in the light of, among other things, Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*. However, Rosati wants to go beyond Deleuze’s work with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the chiasm, in order to understand how the virtual and the actual can belong to each other. To illustrate this relationship, the author discusses at length Merleau-Ponty’s account of Proust’s description of the actress, Berma, playing the role of Phèdre, and significance of the theatre in Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

It is also worth noting that both Switzer’s and Rosati’s essays form a capstone for the collection and, as such, can well be considered an effective “anchor” for the volume. They can therefore significantly increase readers’ sense of the integral character of the collection.

As noted above, all of these interpretive essays are particularizations in diverse artistic media of the central theme of this work—the intertwining of art and perception. As such, they themselves form a chiasmatic unity with the foundation established in Part One: the groundwork extends through them as a connecting thread, while they exemplify and illustrate it, thus uncovering ever deeper and richer layers of meaning inherent in Merleau-Ponty’s fascinating philosophy. Before our players take the stage, however, we must lay the scene.

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