

Introduction

A Plethora of Issues

The transcendence of the thing obliges us to say that it is plenitude only in being inexhaustible, which is to say, in not being fully actual under the look. . . . The senses are apparatus for making concretions in the inexhaustible . . . there is a precipitation or crystallization of the inexhaustible, of the imaginary, of symbolic matrices.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Transcendence of the Thing and Transcendence of the Phantasm”

Merleau-Ponty’s sudden death, in May 1961, not only deprived philosophy of a thinker whose work was incisive and profound as well as wide-ranging in the scope of its intellectual engagements, but it also foreclosed any continuation of his intensive studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual art, and of the challenges it posed to philosophy. Just the summer before his death, he had written *L’œil et l’esprit* (“Eye and Mind”) at Le Tholonet in Provence, and he was intensely engaged in writing *The Visible and the Invisible*, now extant only in its fragmentary form. The art that, due to his death, remained immediately beyond Merleau-Ponty’s reach was that of roughly the second half of the twentieth century, a century whose artistic innovation and complexity remain, so far, unrivaled. This foreclosure of Merleau-Ponty’s own access to recent and contemporary art has given rise to a widespread and somewhat unfortunate tendency among scholarly commentators to focus predominantly on the very same artists or artistic movements with which he himself engaged: prominently Cézanne, followed by Klee, Matisse, Rodin, and the challenges faced and

posed by postimpressionism and cubism. His own focus may also have been somewhat culturally restricted, in that he did not consider contemporary movements in Italian art, such as Futurism, *arte povera* (poor art), or *pittura metafisica* (metaphysical painting), nor yet German Expressionism or, finally, the postwar rise and quick ascendancy to international fame of American abstract painting. The scholarly tendency just criticized has further been paired with a proclivity to concentrate on the issues that the philosopher himself discusses in his aesthetic writings, rather than engaging directly with artworks and the practices of artmaking, bringing them into dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

Fortunately, however, some recent scholarship has, to a significant extent, overcome these scholarly restrictions. In *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics*, Galen A. Johnson carries out in-depth analyses of Cézanne, Rodin, and Klee, in relation to Merleau-Ponty, linking them critically with a discussion of Barnett Newman's rejection of beauty in favor of sublimity, and further with Jean-François Lyotard's exaltation of the sheer event.¹ In *Art, Language, and Figure in Merleau-Ponty: Excursions in Hyper-Dialectic*,² Rajiv Kaushik explores Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "autofigure" in the context of his understanding of a "figured philosophy." He situates Cy Twombly's art (particularly his early "graffiti" pieces) at the site of an intersection between figuration and erasure, and between interiority and exteriority, which he also studies in relation to Klee's graphism. Mauro Carbone, in *The Flesh of Images: Merleau-Ponty between Painting and Cinema*,³ and in many of his other writings, has investigated the philosophical import of Merleau-Ponty's sustained interest in film. Anna Caterina Dalmasso's recent work, *Le corps, c'est l'écran: La philosophie du visuel de Merleau-Ponty*,⁴ offers not only a rich discussion of the philosophy of cinema and of the technologies involved in contemporary visual culture, but also an in-depth analysis of Merleau-Ponty's 1953 lecture course at the Collège de France, "Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression" (The sensible world and the world of expression),⁵ showing that it initiates his late ontology. In 2012, Saara Hacklin defended a doctoral dissertation at the University of Helsinki titled "Divergencies of Perception: The Possibilities of Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology in Analyses of Contemporary Art," in which she focused chiefly on contemporary Finnish artists.⁶ Finally, although David Morris's profound and challenging new book, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*,⁷ does not directly address Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art, but rather the emergence of sense or meaning within material and energetic nature itself, it establishes a standard and frame of reference with

respect to which phenomenological studies of artistic practices and visuality will need to situate themselves.

Taking part in this scholarly conversation with a clear focus on visual art, this book seeks to interpret the work of a selection of artists in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's thought. Although these artists (who are American, with the exception of Morandi, but also introduce a more international perspective in that Mitchell and Twombly were expatriates, with Twombly being also a restless and intercontinental traveler) can roughly be dated to the second half of the twentieth century, no exact temporal delimitations can be established. Thus, for instance, Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) outlived Merleau-Ponty by just three years, but Cy Twombly and Ellsworth Kelly lived and worked into the twenty-first century, and Kiki Smith is a living artist whose future work cannot be foreseen.

Given that no guiding principle of selection interlinks the chosen artists (or, to put it autobiographically, this book took its start from the writer's fascination with certain artistic practices and issues, rather than from a philosophical agenda to which art would be subservient), a measure of heterogeneity prevailed. Heterogeneity is of course a key characteristic of twentieth-century art, and the artists discussed here have often embraced it and integrated it into their work, along with contingency (this is strikingly true of Smith, Twombly, Mitchell, and Kelly). Morris, moreover, points out the radical contingency of philosophy itself, particularly of phenomenology, which, he writes, "can be rigorously empirical only to the degree that it understands its very own concepts and sense as radically contingent on radically contingent being."⁸ Nonetheless, to allow heterogeneity and a certain contingency to inform the very structure of a philosophical work is to risk a lack of theoretical coherence that, as the writing of this book took shape, was a concern.

Somewhat surprisingly and utterly refreshingly, however, it quickly became clear that practices of artmaking as heterogeneous as Morandi's still lifes, Smith's complex and sculpturally informed installations, Twombly's graphism, Mitchell's gestural abstraction, or Kelly's plant drawings entered on their own into quasi-dialogical interchanges that were often inspired (though without explicit reference) by Merleau-Ponty's probing analyses of art (thus showing that their relevance extends tacitly far beyond the art that they explicitly address. These interchanges, however, did not simply confirm the philosopher's analyses but also, at times, deepened or complicated them or introduced critical perspectives. This introduction will explore some of these convergences explicitly, so as not to leave them dispersed and partly concealed within the details of the individual chapters.

Interweaving Dualities

Merleau-Ponty's insistence that there is no genuine duality between figuration and abstraction⁹ is based not so much on art-theoretical analysis, but rather on his ontological understanding of visibility, or of what Mauro Carbone highlights as the notion of *voyance*, characterizing it as equivalent to the Merleau-Pontyan notion of Flesh, understood as a diacritically differential dynamic involving the expressive reciprocity of seer and seen.¹⁰ There is nowhere within this dynamic any primacy of the supposedly "real," as positively and normatively given, over its expressive configurations (the more so since perception, in Merleau-Ponty's understanding, is already primordially expressive). This dynamic, however, is concealed by ordinary or "profane" vision in its quest for familiarity and identification. This quest is, nonetheless, challenged importantly by the painter's or other visual artist's vision,¹¹ for which the created image is in no way reproductive or secondary to a pregiven reality.

Morandi and Kelly, in particular, echo and amplify Merleau-Ponty's insights not only in their art, but also in reflective statements. Far from treating everyday objects—the protagonists of his still lifes—as displaying an incontestable and univocal material reality fully offered to sight, Morandi finds their visual presencing to be alien and incomparably surreal. Kelly stresses the need to do justice to "what the eye sees."¹² Doing so, however, does not invite mimetic adequation or reproductive fidelity (which caters only to Merleau-Pontyan "profane vision") but requires, to the contrary, an autonomous visual articulation. To do justice to what is truly seen is to engage with the event of coming to appearance or presencing itself, which everywhere involves the invisibles of the visible and which may, ontologically speaking, preclude the recognition of an ultimate self-withdrawing source akin to Heidegger's Being of beings. To recognize such a source would reaffirm duality (even though Being is always the Being of beings from which it can in no way dissociate itself). It would legitimate the binary and exclusionary conceptuality proper to metaphysical discourse rather than allowing it to be genuinely overcome. In refusing to recognize or to be bound by conventionally recognized as well as ultimate duality, visual art acknowledges the pervasively enigmatic character of presencing or coming to appearance; and it calls it insistently to the viewer's attention.

Materiality is no less enigmatic in its visual presencing than are felt or oneiric qualities, as well as spatiality (or emplacement) conjoined with temporality. It is striking that, for both Morandi and Kelly, forms often tend

to become desolidified (and thus, in a conventional sense, dematerialized) in favor of process and of the powers of light. They thus render explicit, in advance of intellectual thematization, their participation in the play and the eventfulness of coming to appearance.

Image and Writ

One conventionally recognized duality is that between image and writing or text, even though, outside the context of Western art, this duality has long, and in various ways, been negated by the arts of Islamic calligraphy as well as of Chinese and Japanese brush writing. In the artistic practice of Cy Twombly, however, replete as it is with erasures, dysgraphia, and pseudo-writing, or in Klee's "pictorial writing," Basquiat's graffitilike inscriptions and near-erasures, or Mark Tobey's "white writing" (which borrows from the Near and Far Eastern calligraphies just mentioned), the image and writ are more often in tension than forming a unitary whole. Whether they foreground their differences through an emphasis on complementarity or on dissonance, neither image nor writ enjoy integrity or purity. The text may in fact be only a semblance or a ghost of writing (a ghost that has long haunted the cultures of the three religions "of the book," Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) by refusing decipherable meaning or by being reduced, by means of erasures, to the status of a trace. Twombly, moreover, subverts the integrity of his text (often taken from lyric poetry) by actively fragmenting and reconfiguring it. Even—or perhaps all the more—when reconfigured, the text contaminates the image and deprives it of any assured self-containment. The artworks thus understood attest to a certain devastation or inability, on their part, to communicate univocally a fully shareable meaning. Meaning instead presents itself as withdrawn into the obliterated past or else as promised and thus future, and therefore as always on the threshold an being interminably withheld. Image and text thus not only call attention to but also complicate Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the invisibles of the visible while also calling into question any straightforward complementarity or harmony between eye and mind. Where inscription, moreover, finds itself reduced to the (scribbled) invocation of mythical or historical ancient names, or to the attributes and associations of ancient Greek, Egyptian, or Roman deities and historical figures (such as Virgil), these names are from the outset placed under the sign of irretrievable loss. The artworks that they inspire hence cannot lay claim to the power ascribed to them by

Heidegger of setting up an exemplary and compelling human historical lifeworld while also setting it back into its tensional relationship or strife against unconstrained presencing or presencing's equally unconstrained, and thus inexplicable, refusal.¹³ Artworks can hence neither univocally formulate or interpret, nor yet support, a historical mandate issuing from a quasi-Heideggerian perspective on the "history of Being" (*Seinsgeschichte*). Their reticence and their affinity to the trace carry ethical import through their determined resistance to becoming subservient to ideology, authoritarianism, and totalization.

Artworks and Things

In "The Origin of the Work of Art" (in its final version of 1936), Heidegger poses the question of how to understand the undeniable, if sometimes uncomfortable, kinship between artworks and things. He finds that the humble "mere thing" of nature, such as a block of granite, is characterized by an unconstrained and enigmatic self-containment, or resting-within-itself, whereas the artwork no less enigmatically confronts the viewer with its causally inexplicable and unforeseeable createdness. Notwithstanding its striving to communicate, the artwork is thus more closely akin, for Heidegger, to the mere thing than to the familiar things of use or utensils, even though these, like the work, are humanly created. They are, however, commonly encountered, not in their mysteriousness, but straightforwardly in their serviceability (*Dienlichkeit*), which Heidegger goes on to think at a deeper level as reliability (*Verlässlichkeit*), in that humans can entrust or even abandon themselves to the ways in which things of use configure their lifeworld.¹⁴ He elaborates this by the example of his figure of a Black Forest peasant woman's reliance on the shoes that carry her through her arduous workday, as well as on the ancestral implements that allow her home to be a place of care and nurturance as well as of the events of birth and death. Her implements (probably mostly handmade) are meaningful through their connection with the traditional rhythms of life; but outside of such a connection, things of use for Heidegger degenerate readily into mere usefulness and boring everydayness (to say nothing of sheer detritus or consumer waste, which he does not address).

In contrast to Heidegger's hesitations as to things of use in their ordinariness, together with his contempt for banality, Kiki Smith's art exalts the things of daily use without depriving them of their enigmatic aspects.

She is also sensitive to the fact that, within the historical parameters of women's life situations, their artistic creativity has often expressed itself through craft-based work embellishing things of use. These creations often quite extravagantly imbue home and family life with aesthetic delight and richness of meaning.

Smith also considers the historical implements of daily life (now often collected by museums) to have "memories," and thus to be capable of calling up, and initiating the viewer, into modes of life remote in time, culture, or geography. Since Smith herself is accomplished in a wide range of media, including both electronic and traditional craft techniques, things of use, whether historical or contemporary, often form part of her installations. It is also significant that she associates a meditative dwelling with things of use with offering resistance to the violence pervasive in contemporary culture.

When Heidegger resumes his meditation on things in his essay "Das Ding" (The thing) of 1950,¹⁵ he no longer seeks to set apart simple things of nature from works of art and from things of use, but rather he endeavors to understand the very thing-being of things. Contrary to the ordinary understanding of things as exemplary of solid material reality, he now thinks the thing in terms of its fundamental insubstantiality, in that it configures itself out of emptiness (*die Leere*). The thing is thus deprived of substantive identity and thought rather in relation to the dimensions of the Fourfold of earth, heaven, divinities, and mortals, which it gathers (while nonetheless safeguarding their distances) into the proximity of an event of presencing. The thing thus gathers the free or unconstrained "mirror play," or the "ring" of the Fourfold, into a world that may hold sway, and it brings the world close.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly address the thing-being of things (nor engage with the echoes of Daoist thought prominent in Heidegger's essay), he grants to things a fundamental insubstantiality in affirming that, being mutable and, in their mutability, inexhaustible, they are never given in full presence or actuality. It is perhaps the nonpositivity of things in their presencing that underlies his rejection, with respect to visual art, of the duality of figuration and abstraction. The work of art, thing though it may be, is privileged in that it not only participates in but reveals and highlights this nonpositivity. The work of the artists discussed here, particularly those of Morandi and Mitchell, attest to their recognition of the nonpositivity of presencing. Although Morandi's art espouses the classical and figurative formats of still life and landscape, it is haunted by the insubstantiality of forms that are, for him, interpenetrated by space, as

well as attesting to the plasticity of space and the corrosive powers of light. Mitchell, in her gestural abstraction, is in quest of essentiality and truth while repudiating the classical conception of truth as a conformity of mental representation to commonsensical “reality,” and also as capable of linguistic explanation. Art thus shows itself to be more fundamentally attuned, in a challenging way, to the ontological understanding that both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty seek, in different ways, to develop in their late thought.

The Artist within Her or His Time

In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty reflects that “the painter is alone in having the right to look at all things without the duty of evaluation.”¹⁶ The statement echoes his view, voiced in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” that painting inhabits “a dreaming eternity” detached from knowledge and action.¹⁷ Although in “Eye and Mind” he speaks only about painting’s “right” to withdrawal, rather than of its actual or inevitable practice thereof, even this late statement is questionable.¹⁸

At the time of this writing, visual art is often preoccupied with the issues of colonialism, race, sexuality, gender, and politics; but even in the recent past, when it still cultivated the reticence of minimalism, if not, to use Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, ever “since Lascaux,” it has engaged with the experience and exigencies of its time. The creation of meditative or contemplative and thus silent work is no less a response by the artist’s particular sensibility (formed by factors such as temperament and life history) to the ambitions, exaltations, or traumas of the time. It is thus, as a response, individual and finite and cannot absolutize itself, even though the quest for meaning and the call to responsibility, which it heeds, are not finitized.

Of the artists discussed in this book, Smith and Kelly stand out most clearly for their engagement with aspects of contemporary life, although Twombly’s concern with war, vengeance, and violence, approached through ancient Mediterranean history or mythology, must not be marginalized. Smith’s focus, in much of her art, is on “being alive here in the body,” whether human or animal, and on both the body’s expressivity and exposure and vulnerability to trauma and violation. Given her sense of the contemporary urgency of the threat of ecological devastation, her art has also, since the mid-1990s, importantly addressed animal bodies and the human interbeing with animality, and ultimately with the elemental and cosmic dimensions of nature.

Kelly's career-long practice of drawing plant forms from life, as well as making them the basis of lithographic works (and ultimately of his distinctive "way of seeing," whatever the medium) goes beyond human interbeing with animality to reach into the still philosophically neglected understanding of vegetal life's modalities of perception and of world articulation, drawing here on Jakob von Uexküll's pathbreaking researches into the lifeworlds (*Umwelten*) of animals who were, within the parameters of his own research, mostly primitive invertebrates (and thus hardly at a significant remove from plants). Given that von Uexküll's lifework was well known to Heidegger and influenced his conception of human world articulation (that is, of *Da-sein's Umwelt*), one needs to recognize its prefigurations within animality but also to move beyond this zoological focus to recognize the importance of addressing plant-being (concerning which Merleau-Ponty maintains an unbroken silence).

Kelly's devotion, from an early age, to studying the appearance of life forms, such as insects, fish, and importantly birds, together with his almost career-long studies of plants, makes for a practice that served to discourage an understanding of artistic creation in terms of the artist's pure subjectivity, juxtaposed to an objectification of natural life. Objectification encourages uncaring indifference and thus supports ecological devastation, whereas an artist's attentiveness to the aesthetic creativity and refinement of natural life serves to bring home its preciousness and the compelling need to safeguard it.

Notable within the complexities of Kelly's art is, furthermore, his full integration of painting with architecture. In his numerous public commissions, which included a wall of the UNESCO building and the LVMA Forum Auditorium, both in Paris, as well as the Boston panels that transformed a previously dull courthouse into an energized and engaging space full of visual surprises, he realized his ambition of creating large, content-specific public works. The component panels of such works, painted on surfaces such as wood or aluminum, maintain a fine-tuned balance between being integral to the architecture and constituting autonomous works of art.

Before painting came to be understood largely in terms of oil or acrylic discrete works on canvas, it often adorned architectural spaces in the form of murals or frescoes, painted ceilings, or, in more remote times, the painted interiors of the rock-hewn caves of Ajanta, Ellora, or Dunhuang. Painting that is integral to architecture and thus to the configuration of public (or ceremonial) spaces visually and even viscerally communicates the ideas and ideals preminent in its time. It has the ability to shape the comportment

and interrelations of individuals that pass through or linger within these spaces. Painting thus shows itself, as Kelly appreciated, to contribute actively to shaping the public domain as the arena of thought and action.

The Question of Beauty

Merleau-Ponty credits animals with inventing visibles (*inventer du visible*),¹⁹ but they also invent sonorities as well as forms of aesthetic expression that might be likened to dance, choreography, architecture (as in bower birds), or athletic performances that constitute an aesthetic display. In *The Evolution of Beauty*, ornithologist Richard O. Prum defends and further develops Darwin's contested as well as neglected theory, in his *The Descent of Man*, that evolution driven by natural selection is complemented by a drive toward aesthetic pleasure in excess of adaptive advantage.²⁰ Adolf Portmann already discussed the fact that the elaboration of sheer appearance and display can counteract and compromise utility. Prum's example of such a preeminence of aesthetic desire and delight over survival advantage is that of the male club-winged manakin, a bird that uses its wings for extraordinary musical sound production to the detriment of efficient flight. Due to the peculiarities of avian embryonic development, this detriment also afflicts females (to whom, nonetheless, the performance is offered).

In Prum's view, female mate choice is the impetus for animal (particularly avian) aesthetic creativity and accomplishment. The avian female is an exacting judge of her suitors' appearance and aesthetic achievements, but her species-specific criteria are fundamentally arbitrary rather than embodying ideals of beauty that could be universalized. If aesthetic creativity governs mate choice and thus species survival, Portmann's "unaddressed appearances" (which are elaborated in the absence of any possible eye to appreciate them) point to the excess of aesthetic creativity in organismic nature over utility in any form.²¹ Beauty, however it is elaborated, seems to constitute a vital need for organisms ranging from invertebrates, and even primitive microscopic organisms, to higher animals.

The vital importance of beauty renders its eclipse in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century art and art theoretical discourse problematic and challenging. Of the artists discussed in this book, none rejected beauty; but perhaps especially Mitchell and Smith explicitly recognized it. Although Mitchell expressed her fundamental and professed commitment to beauty in the powerful beauty achieved by her best work, such as *To the Harbor-*

master (1957), *Morning* (1971), or, as discussed in chapter 4, her suite of paintings known as *La Grande Vallée* (The Great Valley), her realization of beauty is persistently achieved at an extreme of tension (fundamentally between chaos and order) offering no harmonious resolution. Smith, who also values beauty, finds it chiefly realized in works that have a “cut” in them in that they do not reject, but rather acknowledge and transmute, ugliness. Agnes Martin (discussed briefly in chapter 6), understands beauty as ideal perfection; but perfection for her is essentially insubstantial, lacking plenitude and self-sufficiency. It thus repudiates any effort at dominance or totalization that would validate of hierarchies of perfection. Kelly’s art similarly withdraws beauty from what Merleau-Ponty calls positivity by allowing chance at times to complement consummate form.

Such practices of artmaking constitute a salutary response to beauty’s trivialization and abuses as well as to its willful withholding. If beauty is indeed a vital need, its abuse as an instrument of domination, or its rejection, are likely to bring about cynicism or desolation. However, much as one may sympathize with Prum’s view that there is a need today for “a post-human aesthetic philosophy that places us, and our artworlds, in context with other animals,”²² one also needs to acknowledge the surpassing, and perhaps unique, importance of the ethical dimension for human life. Art, as a consummate realization of the human quest for meaning and beauty, remains, in its import, indissociable from ethicality, which therefore provides the ultimate context for thinking philosophically about art.