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„The Painting Body: A Phenomenological Seismograph

—

Analysing the Practice of Painting with Merleau-Ponty's Ideas on the
Body and Perception “

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Abstract Deutsch

Die folgende Masterarbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Körper in der Praxis des Malens, in welcher der Körper als ein Instrument eines bestimmten Bewusstseinszustands untersucht wird. Ein Zustand, der dem wissenschaftlichen, Objekt-bezogenen Denken etwas entgegensetzen will. Das tiefere Verständnis dieser Form von Bewusstsein soll uns ein facettenreicheres Bild unserer täglichen Wahrnehmung ermöglichen. In diesem Sinne wird die Arbeit zuerst den phänomenologisch relevanten Rahmen aufbauen, um zu verstehen, *warum* die vorliegende Arbeit eine Erweiterung gegenüber bereits existierenden Theorien über Malerei darstellt. Dabei wird zuerst Maurice Merleau-Pontys Verständnis des verkörperten Subjekts zentral sein, dann die Rolle des Anderen im Verhältnis zu diesem Subjekt und schließlich die Diskussion über die Wahrnehmung der Welt im Rahmen seiner Theorie des Sichtbaren und Unsichtbaren. Der zweite Teil der Arbeit wendet sich dann dem Malen an sich zu: Erstens wird der Blick des Malenden skizziert, welcher in dem Paradigma eines „körperlichen“ Sehens fußt. In zweiter Linie wird über den Aspekt des Malens als einer Gewohnheits-Praxis gesprochen, der sich von einer Diskussion über malerische Werkzeuge, über den divergierenden Charakter des Malens bis hin zu einer Bezugnahme auf das Konzept des individuellen Stiles erstreckt. In letzter Instanz wird versucht den spezifischen Bewusstseinszustand im Malen phänomenologisch nachzuzeichnen. Dabei wird festgestellt, dass es in diesem einerseits zu einer *Entfremdung* von der Welt und andererseits zu einem *Ausdruck* durch die Welt kommt. Zum Abschluss gibt es noch zwei phänomenologische Fallbeispiele, um die Argumente und Erkenntnisse dieser Masterarbeit zu unterstreichen.

Abstract English

The following Master-thesis will discuss the body in the practice of painting, where the body serves as a vehicle for a specific state of consciousness that is claimed to give us, in understanding the same, a richer and fuller account for our everyday conscious experience of the world. An account that contrasts the scientific attitude towards the objects of the world. In doing this, the thesis will firstly build up a phenomenological framework to show *why* an analysis like this will be an enrichment compared to already existing theories and understandings of painting. Following the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this framework will have its locus in understanding the conception of an “embodied subject”, then go on to describe his notion of the “Other” and finally will have its furthest outlook on the perception of the world in his discussion of “visibility and invisibility”. After having built up this phenomenological ground-structure, the thesis will turn to an actual investigation of the practice of painting in the second half: Firstly, it will discuss the painter’s “gaze” in its graduations, as a specific way of looking *as* an embodied painting subject. Then it will investigate the habituality of the practice, including painting tools, painting’s divergent character and the concept of style. And thirdly the state of consciousness will be traced and discussed phenomenologically in its function of either an alienation from or expression of the world. As a practical reference, the thesis will shift to a concrete phenomenological investigation of two artists that are good examples of the prior made claims in the last section.

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Plagiatserklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich, die vorgelegte Arbeit selbständig verfasst und ausschließlich die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt zu haben. Alle wörtlich oder dem Sinn nach aus anderen Werken entnommenen Textpassagen und Gedankengänge sind durch genaue Angabe der Quelle in Form von Anmerkungen bzw. In-Text-Zitationen ausgewiesen. Dies gilt auch für Quellen aus dem Internet, bei denen zusätzlich URL und Zugriffsdatum angeführt sind. Mir ist bekannt, dass jeder Fall von Plagiat zur Nicht-Bewertung der gesamten Lehrveranstaltung führt und der Studienprogrammleitung gemeldet werden muss. Ferner versichere ich, diese Arbeit nicht bereits andernorts zur Beurteilung vorgelegt zu haben.

1. Introduction

Paintings strike us in a distinctive way. Unlike other artforms paintings bear within themselves no other reference than our possibility of seeing: our visibility. An ability that connects us directly to our body and the world. Detached from other realms of significance that surely run into our visibility of the world, seeing in its most primal form likewise serves as a metaphor for our bodies' exploring of the world. This may be one of the most prominent reasons for our fascination when looking at a painting even if we are not always consciously aware of that. Experiencing a painting can take us back to visions of the world that we would ordinarily be inattentive to. It shows us a glimpse of a mode of being that is most pristine for all our experience but remains for the most part unrecognized. Namely how our *bodies* bring forth the world we live in and how there is a "constitutive connection between body, movement and vision"¹ that generates the world for us in every moment that we experience. Most observers of paintings nevertheless will not have this philosophical recognition as a reaction to their fascination towards a painting. However, the experiencing of painting from an unreflective observer's point of view often has the sense of disclosure although the outcome from it might be shadowed by mystery. This effect of painting for us thus happens because the activity of painting deliberately – or not – uncovers patterns of experience, precisely that very perception that we are usually unreceptive to but which we can thus somewhat "sense" that they are there. Therefore, it is the task of this thesis to unravel the different aspects of this inherently *bodily* activity of painting to discover *how* the activity displays the active and fundamental connections between body, movement and vision that happen through our lived bodies in a permanent tie with the world.

The painter lives in fascination. The actions most proper to him – those gestures, those tracings of which he alone is capable, and which will be revelations to others because they do not lack what he lacks – to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like figures emanating from the constellations.²

1.1. Merleau-Ponty and a Phenomenology of Perception

It was Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*1908- † 1961) who recognized this special connection between body and world just as the role of visibility in his study of phenomenology and centred his work

¹ Stenger, Georg: „From Cézanne's Doubt to Ai Weiwei's Subversive Engagement. Art at the Edge of the Lifeworld" in *Yearbook for Eastern and Western Philosophy*. Issue No.3. 2018, p. 288

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: "Eye and Mind". Translation from the French original by James M. Edie: In: Johnson, Galen A. (eds.): *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. 1st Edition. United States of America: Northwestern University Press 1993, p. 129

mainly around the topic of perception. It is therefore no surprise that Merleau-Ponty was engaging with the subject of painting very consciously as he saw it as exactly this: an activity that reveals something *there* but simultaneously invisible. Besides his colossal main work, “The Phenomenology of Perception”, three essays will be especially important for this thesis, namely “Cézanne’s Doubt”, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” and “Eye and Mind”. Rooting his analysis in the role of seeing as a privileged way of perceiving due to its naïve way of experiencing, it is also no coincidence that he used the terms “visible” and “invisible” nearly as ontological categories for the world. Using Merleau-Ponty as the main theoretical locus for this thesis it must nevertheless be recognized that other ways of perceiving the world (like hearing, smelling, or touching) have different constitutive bonds with the world that are equally (ontologically) valid, but which will not be separately discussed in this context (while it is implied that these other senses all somehow play into the over-all experience of seeing).

Coming back to a more methodological remark on Merleau-Ponty, another important reason for using him in the context of painting is the phenomenological method itself and its – as the thesis will argue – special stance for painting within the same. The phenomenological method, rooting in Husserl’s critique on Modern Sciences, opposes the more “quantitative” approach of collecting data for proposed hypotheses, which does not only objectify the subjective experience of individuals but in certain cases also neglects their quality of insight completely. In contrast, the phenomenological method proposes a more “bottom-up” model that – especially with the work of Merleau-Ponty – takes seriously the spontaneously reflected experiences of individuals and tries to explain these described phenomena as a base for further investigation. These so-called “first-person-reports” are therefore the qualitative foundation for a coming-closer to the structures of (in Merleau-Ponty’s case) perception and/or consciousness throughout a descriptive approximation. What is interesting in painting is that these “first-person-reports” are certainly the paintings themselves as they are the immediate “report” of the phenomena experienced by the painter. In the same way Husserl’s phenomenological attitude was opposing the scientific attitude, one could therefore say Merleau-Ponty’s approach on painting is opposing the art-historian approach on painting, whose mostly semantic- or semiotic-based models of interpretation already define paintings as signs,³ detached from their making. The phenomenological approach therefore comes back to the experience itself as the source of meaning.

³ Cf. Schulz, Martin: *Ordnungen der Bilder. Eine Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft*. 1st Edition. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2005, pp 43/44

Nevertheless, it also should be kept in mind that Maurice Merleau-Ponty died unexpectedly in 1961, leaving his chain of thought certainly “unfinished”, for which reason some of his concepts and analysis may lack a depth that could have been developed further. Thoughts from his last unfinished work “The Visible and the Invisible” will therefore also be treated in this thesis considering this fact. Additionally, other schools of thought gained importance for the theoretical framing of painting in the second half of the 20th century, which focused on more discursive levels of painting in an often social or political context. The thesis will not go into these aspects (although they could be included in the theory quite validly *even with* Merleau-Ponty) but really shift the attention to the practice as a *bodily activity* and its function as a seismograph for the not-yet-visible aspects of our visible world.

1.2. Painting as a Gesture of the Body

To give a full picture of the ways in which the world expresses itself within the activity of painting through the body, it will firstly be important to understand and elaborate the relations that are crucial for understanding the special kind of painterly thinking that is developed through them. For this reason, the thesis will be divided in two parts: first it will look at the three relations that painters find themselves embedded in. Second, it will look closely at the phenomenon of the activity in observance of the intentionality that is at stake in painting and how it is developed.

1.2.1. The Body, the Other, the World

When looking at painting as a gesture of the body in which a certain intention is realized, it must be firstly acknowledged what *body* means in reference to any intention. What this thesis will first and foremost suppose when talking about a “body” is the *embodied subject* in its role as a painter.

One of the great merits of phenomenology is to have given back to man the right to an authentic existence, by eliminating the opposition of the subject and the object.⁴

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was therefore doing two things with his terminology: breaking with the philosophical tradition of separating any ontological analyses either on the side of the object or on the side of the subject. As well as compromising the opposing notions of Empiricism and

⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone: “A review of *The Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty”. Translation from the French original by Marybeth Timmermann: In: Ted Toadvine (Eds.): *Merleau-Ponty. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers. Volume 1: Merleau-Ponty’s contemporaries and the phenomenological tradition*. 1st Edition. Oxon: Routledge 2006, p. 15

Rationalism with its “disengaged observer” or its “disembodied ego”⁵ that caused “[...] a split between the world which is regarded as the object of philosophical or scientific investigation and the individual who is taken to be the subject of those investigations.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s main reason to talk about an “embodied” subjectivity, is that he wanted to make clear that there is no external ideal world to be observed but that our monitoring of the world and how we subjectively experience it is essentially shaped by *our* bodily constitution.

The way we move around and perceive the space with our *lived bodies* constitutes our world in the first place and manifests itself thus in an ontological connection. It is important to comprehend *how* sense-bestowing our moving around through the world with the body is, to really access and understand perception in the way Merleau-Ponty did.

In a further sense it is equally important to understand how this *lived body* of ours is an ambiguous one, amongst all other things in the world. As the centre of our own subjective being, it is the only thing that is both: the seer and the seen. Hence, also the world it brings forward is in this sense ambiguous as all objects given to us in perception give themselves to us always from this specific point of one respective body and can never fully reveal themselves to us, although every new perspective might reveal a new aspect:

[...] at the same time as they offer this familiar aspect, things offer another side: they also are silence and mystery, an Other who escapes. They are never fully given but on the contrary always open.⁷

Before explicating the vital relation between us bodies and the perceived world it will be necessary for the thesis to understand that “communication” as the “always being-there of the Other” is essential for the prior mentioned openness of things in the world. As Merleau-Ponty rightly points out, communication would make no sense if there was not this difference in idiom, viewpoint or experience.⁸ The intersubjectivity that presupposes it lies in the heart of the earlier mentioned ambiguity of the body: the intertwining of seeing and seen.⁹ For Merleau-Ponty then “[...] the nature of communication is revealed not as something we do but as that which is always already taking place.”¹⁰ This means that the mere constitution of the body already suggests a dialogic exchange which forces us to continuously explore and cope with the objects in the world. As we are at the same time always an *embodied subject* within other

⁵ Cf. Andrews, Jorella: *The Question of Painting. Rethinking Thought with Merleau-Ponty*. 1st Edition. Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, p. 80

⁶ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 80

⁷ De Beauvoir: *Review of the Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 18

⁸ Cf., Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 185

⁹ Cf. Ibid p. 216

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 132

embodied subjects, the way in which we are being forced to communicate about these different perspectives – the fact that there are “[...] many ways for the world to be a world [...]”¹¹ – brings to light our innate capacity to symbolize¹²:

Since, as symbolizing beings, we are capable of perceiving *as if* from the point of view of others, since we regard the world and the things in the world ‘under a plurality of aspects’, our different modes of perceiving overlap in our own experience, and, by extension, in the experiences of the group.¹³

Taking these points into a closer consideration in the aspect of painting the thesis will finally move to the third and final relation that seems important to understand for the second half of the paper: our recognition of the world and the objects within.

Having already stated repeatedly that the world comes forward *through* our lived body, the next question would be, if it then always stays the same for the individual. In history but also in our day-to-day experience it can be remarkably observed that opposing to new “objective” knowledge about the world through scientific improvement or inventions, artistic “improvement” extended our perception always on a much more ambiguous level. As this thesis’ goal is exactly to make these ambiguities a little more comprehensible, it nevertheless seems important to emphasize again which concept of “world” Merleau-Ponty (and most of the phenomenologists of the time) was opposed to: the scientific world with all its analysable objects. It shall not be argued in this thesis that the scientific world is somehow less valuable, rather it is quite essential to have a *common* understanding of the things in the world at all. However, as with Merleau-Ponty, artistic thinking offers a possibility of making the distinction between “the spontaneous organization of the things we perceive and the human organization of ideas of sciences”¹⁴ apparent. And to be recognised as such from the world-embedded observer, it seems essentially necessary that “[...] art situates itself particularly at the borders of the lifeworld, its abysses, and its framings, a task that in turn transforms art itself, in the sense that it henceforward functions as a harbinger of new and genuine lifeworlds.”¹⁵ Also the practice of painting shall be – as will be argued in the thesis – analysed in this way: how does painting always operate on the borders of the Visible and yet points to an “Invisible”? Merleau-

¹¹ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 99

¹² Cf. *Ibid*, p. 99

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 99

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: “Cézanne’s Doubt”. Translation from the French original by Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. In: Johnson, Galen A. (eds.): *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. 1st Edition. United States of America: Northwestern University Press 1993, p. 64

¹⁵ Stenger: *From Cezanne’s Doubt to Ai Weiwei*, p. 283

Ponty's concept of "visibility" and "invisibility" will, for this part, only be discussed in an abstract sense, whereas it will become more specific in the later discussion of the phenomenal practice of painting reaching the second half of the paper.

It is at the same time true that the world is *what we see* and that nonetheless, we must learn to see it.¹⁶

1.2.2. The Painter's Gaze and the Embodied Practice of Painting

The second half of the thesis will be committed closer to the actual activity of painting, the special state painters find themselves in and the modalities painting can express itself with. It is here that the (for phenomenology in general) very important notion of "Intentionality" comes into context. Having in mind the phenomenological critique on philosophy and science that would oppose both the subjectifying rationalists' just as the objectifying empiricists' notion of experience, Phenomenology rather wants to shift the attention to the "bridge" that is connecting the two epistemic borders (Object and Subject), namely "intentionality": the fact that our consciousness is always directed *towards* something. More precisely, phenomenology understands the decoding of this intentionality as the primary source for gaining any insight of the world. The "How" to our experiencing of phenomena.

Now, as this thesis orbits around Maurice Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of phenomenology and painting, it will focus on the distinctive form of intentionality that the embodied painter is linked to with their world. It entails the pictorial looking of the painter that involves a quite different engagement with the world than in ordinary perception, an engagement which due to the indeterminacy of the Visible allows for different forms of it being experienced.¹⁷ And it is the painter who is actively looking for those forms which in return presuppose a very different commitment to perception than in ordinary vision. There are a couple of aspects that reflect how this painterly "looking" is opposing the objective world, which will also later be mentioned in the paper (issues as a certain kind of "non-possessiveness", "intention-lessness" or allowance for "mood-fullness" of looking).

Another relevant aspect for the painter's gaze is in what way its presupposed through the constitutive connection between body, movement, and vision. The looking is a "corporal" looking, one which always shifts when the body is moved (aside from the fact that eyes are also a moving organ). The perspectivism for which this assumption allows is another good reason why painting seems a good analogy for our "primordial" being-in-the-world, a situatedness that

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 236

¹⁷ Cf. Wentworth, Nigel: *The Phenomenology of Painting*. 1st Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 99

is not rigid but open for a lot of different vantage points. And just as we in the early stages of our life must “learn” the world and orientate ourselves within it by exploring, also the painter’s body is a *habitual* one, just as the “gaze” which derives from it. One is mistaken, if one thinks that it is like putting on a special pair of glasses for the painter to suddenly perceive the world in the unique way that is fruitful for the current painting. It is a continuous process of learning, of abstracting, of putting back together and refining that a painter goes through with every work of painting he or she is processing. The spontaneity of this painterly intentional way of looking only comes through a trained body, which is also exactly why painting needs “[...] an account that understands and locates the activity of painting between the levels of mere reflex and full pre-meditated action.”¹⁸

As opposing very deliberately the trap of going too deep into concrete “interpretations” of paintings (as this would surrender the aspect of immediacy of the “first-person-report”-qualities of paintings) it is yet a valid question to ask, which kinds of paintings one would ideally have in mind while reading the following paper. It is apparent that in most of the literature used for this thesis, the majority of authors write about paintings from the modern age on (evolving around 1900), sometimes incorporating its ancestors from the 2nd half of the 19th century. This has two reasons. Firstly, it might stem from the fact that Merleau-Ponty, finding his philosophical-painterly role model in Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) emphasized on Modern Painting as not introducing an entirely new agenda into the activity of painting but developing aspects that have always been integral to it albeit, in certain periods, only in understated or largely unrecognized manners, because of its cultural and historical conditions that entailed other prioritizations.¹⁹ This might seem a little bit unprecise – and the thesis will also come back to Merleau-Ponty’s reason for this focus – but in a more general sense, one could say that the painterly “craft” just developed a very different status in society and shifted from a tool of representation to an activity of expression during the 19th century that simply allowed for a much greater freedom. It is for this reason that also this thesis will mostly refer to the developments of paintings from the beginning of the modern era, when accentuating the realm of the Visible. To add some concreteness to the cause, the thesis will yet show two examples as practical answer to its theoretical assumptions that both in certain ways embodied in their practice what Merleau-Ponty asserted in his thought: namely, the Austrian painters Markus Prachensky (*1932-†2011) and Wolfgang Hollegha (1929-present). In both cases, it shall be

¹⁸ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 43

¹⁹ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 197

shown in a dialogical phenomenological analysis between the observation of practice and the finished paintings, how the two might serve as good groundings for the concepts brought forth in this thesis.

Because when coming back to the opening question for this Master thesis – what painting displays or shows to us qua its activity – it must be acknowledged that the following paper does not want to account for a “why” or a “what” of the painters’ activity but for a “how”:

It needs to be stressed again here that I am not presupposing in any way what the painter is drawn to communicate, which aspect of his experience, be it perceptual, intellectual, religious, or emotional. Whatever it is, it will have to be done by the realisation of figurative elements out of his experience, those which express it. I am trying to account for how this is done. The why and for what is the painter’s business.²⁰

2. The Perceptual Realm of the Painter

The phenomenological “net” which Merleau-Ponty acts on the assumption of seems all-encompassing yet bases its hypothesis on very specific constellations that are presumed by the same. All-encompassing is to be said because the phenomenon of intentionality – which is for phenomenology the leading concept for any insight on the “truths” of the world – derives *not* from a meticulous analysis of cognitive functions, but simply from *how* we experience things, others, and ourselves in perception. And this “How” – neglecting all knowledge from a reflected consciousness –, the relation of the thing perceived to perception or the intention to the realising gesture, is somehow “magical” for naïve consciousness.²¹ Magical in the sense that simply in observing one’s own experience of a thing, the underlying experiential mechanisms will not reveal themselves only through this observation: The phenomenon seems whole but mysterious. It is no wonder that Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work is still very much influenced by the findings of Gestalt-theory that demonstrated a differentiation between “real” and “perceived” things saying that “[...] sensations are *from the first* perceived in configurations, as ‘wholes’, ‘forms’, or ‘Gestalts’”²². However, Merleau-Ponty did articulate a very concrete foundation as the background for these “wholes” that are the sensations of things, others, or us in perception.

Preceding an application of these structures onto the realm of the activity of painting, the following chapter will elaborate on the different levels that are necessary to understand, for a wider comprehension of the whole of perceptual experience with Merleau-Ponty. Starting off from the subject itself, it will then go over to the role of the other or otherness, and finally zoom-

²⁰ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 98

²¹ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 77

²² Ibid., p. 83

out on the general connection from consciousness with the things in world, leading into the first supposition on how painting can be understood as a gesture *of* the body.

2.1. The Embodied Subject

It might seem a little confusing that despite Merleau-Ponty's attempt of breaking loose with the established philosophical concepts of Rationalism and Empiricism that sustained (for him) wrongly headed notions of Subject and Object, to yet use the term "Subject" here at all. Nevertheless, it seems important— especially within the later context in the practice of painting – to preserve the subject here as the origin of a *subjective* form of experience (meaning that it derives from one specific individual). So instead of simply replacing "Subject" by "Being", the thesis will rather ask what it means for a subject to be embodied.

There is a twofold way in which one could look at Merleau-Ponty's critique on Empiricist and Rationalist standpoints.

Firstly, the *embodied* aspect of the critique due to Rationalism that was wrongly qualifying the Cogito, or in other terms, the subjective consciousness as somehow detached from an experiencing body as if existing in some transcendental realm. On this part of the critique Merleau-Ponty (opposing his theoretical ancestor Edmund Husserl) is neglecting the existence of a "subject as pure consciousness"²³.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty articulates a *subjective* aspect of the critique due to Empiricism that was not taking seriously the "embodied nature of its own seeing"²⁴ meaning that the disengaged observer is never disengaged, as he is always perceiving from a subjective point of view of their body. Thereby also the assumption of a perceived "object as *in itself*"²⁵ is not true with Merleau-Ponty as the perception of the object can never be detached from its subjective point of view.

2.1.1. The Ambiguous Body

Acknowledging Merleau-Ponty's critique and his compromising term of the "embodied subject", one may ask what changes for the phenomenological investigation now that the subject of experience is embodied. He is thereby firstly turning to a different notion, namely that of "behaviour", which he assumed to be neutral on behalf of the classical mind-body distinction. This is because the way our behaviour is experienced by ourselves is suggesting

²³ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 80

²⁴ Ibid., p. 80

²⁵ Ibid., p. 80

[...] the sense of a world that is experienced as having a crucial degree of independent existence which is therefore capable of arousing genuine curiosity, and which may be interacted with in ways that are both responsive and purposive.²⁶

The prior claim is therefore such as, that through our embodiment in the world we are tied to it in a way that is dialogical. As for the Rationalist and its “disembodied cogito” everything would have to be transparent due to its acknowledgment as properties of the mind and nothing could ever be mysterious. For the Empiricist on the other side nothing could ever be subjectively altered as a mystery “for us” due to the purely objective Being of the world. In both cases there would not be an explanation for why curiosities of the world would arise on a subjective level. So to speak, Merleau-Ponty takes seriously the richness of our day-to-day experience whilst all other systems of thought failed to articulate *what it is like* to live in the world of other people, things and events.²⁷

And it is at the heart of this analysis that Merleau-Ponty did acknowledge in certain ways that there will be a certain non-transparency of his account of experience as it is, opposing to a rational mind *not* “[...] a world that is unambiguous, given in transparency, purged of mystery and otherness” just as it will not be “[...] in principle wholly graspable, [and] possible to say exactly where everything is.”²⁸

Turning to the experience of the embodied subject this acknowledgment of ambiguity becomes especially apparent when looking at the subject’s self-referentiality to themselves as embodied beings and how the same separates in different layers of experience.

[...] the influential physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach, writing in the 1880s, criticized the standard Cartesian distinction between subject and object, arguing that the usual notion of the ego is misleading because the individual is really only a ‘relatively stable complex of sensational elements.’²⁹

This relativity/ambiguity becomes especially apparent when the differentiation of layers is not working in the way it is agreed upon by the consenting scientific world and when the relating to “[...] the milieu (the way in which we are able to hold together a sense of the concrete with a sense of the possible or the virtual)”³⁰ becomes blurred. Psychologist Louis Sass articulated

²⁶ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 85

²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 84

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 239

²⁹ Sass, Louis: *Madness and Modernism. Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*. Revised Edition 2017. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, p. 176

³⁰ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 93

in his book “Madness and Modernism” that the developments in Modern Art have some outstanding parallels to the symptoms of Schizophrenia, whereas it must be expected that also the painting subject somehow alters their relating to the “milieu”. For Merleau-Ponty the relating to this “milieu” begins with the ambiguous way the subject is relating to itself which again has its roots in the primordial ambiguity of the body.

Thus, the ambiguity of the body (which brings forth the ambiguity of the world) is understood through the ambiguity of time.³¹ With the existence of an experiencing body personal time is arrested, while impersonal time continuous to flow: our personal past is manifested in our bodies, thereby it does not move away from us but always hides behind our gaze (in lieu of being displayed before our gaze), which again should not be mistaken for memory as the same lays previous experience out before us like a painting.³² To make this a little more concrete, what is said here is that whatever the world *is* for us, it is like this through whatever we have experienced: that it is our personal time manifested and “arrested” in *our* body. And as we are always the same *embodied* subjects, we can also never escape it - it (as our body) has a “peculiar permanence” for us:

[...] it [our body] is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perception, that it is with me.³³

The body is therefore a “middle term between presence and absence”³⁴ and it is this, which founds the self-reflexivity of this embodied subjectivity and the explanation why our problems with the world are always connected to the fact that “[...] everything resides within the world.”³⁵

However, there is more to say to the ambiguity of the body. Being in this constant middle between presence and absence, also our *felt* body can oscillate between two modes of perceiving. It is likewise the perceiver of itself and the perceived object, which is a unique mode of perception contrasting every other visible thing. The famous example of Merleau-Ponty’s two hands pressing against each other, which was supposed to illustrate the reversible nature of the body, being both the pressing hand and the hand pressed onto, is therefore illuminating.

³¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translation from the French original Donald A. Landes. 1st English Edition 2012. Oxon: Routledge 2012, p. 87

³² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 85

³³ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 137

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 304

Turning away from the immediately sensible, one can make the same diagnosis with the way we *look*: “[...] the body as both seeing and seen, either by the self, by other people or, more generally, as seeable.”³⁶ Although it must be added that in certain ways seeing and sensing are quite alike in the ways Merleau-Ponty understood them. Especially in the context of painting (which will be discussed broadly in chapters 3) seeing is remarked as a sort of touching the things with one’s eyes. Considering this, it is no surprise that Merleau-Ponty likewise suggests that “[...] when that motility and immediate sense of the spatiality of our own bodies is no longer an aspect of self-awareness, also lost is an intentional, imaginative and creative stance towards the world.”³⁷ So certainly, for any intentional act but *especially* creative acts, this awareness of ambiguity (conscious or not) is crucial for its existence at all. That said, it might be assumed that this marginal representation of one’s own body and the ambiguity it inherits is the true trait for creativity in general, as exploring its limits is a search for the borders of visibility.

Going away from the self-reflective part of our consciousness towards its manifestation in the body, the whole issue from the embodied subject could also be looked at from the “other” side. Namely from the human capability of *withdrawing* from one’s body, which for Merleau-Ponty only serves as proof that it is our body that first and foremost “[...] opens me up to the world and puts me in a situation there.”³⁸:

At the very moment when I live in a world and I am directed towards my projects, my occupations, my friends, or my memories, I can close my eyes, lie down, listen to my blood pulsing in my ears, lose myself in some pleasure or pain, and lock myself up in this anonymous life that underpins my personal life.³⁹

Another example how this ambiguity can be experienced is the way the world alters for us when we are absorbed in ourselves for some other, maybe indeliberate, reason. It does not need to be with closed eyes that one can be absorbed in one’s body. Feelings of anxiety are here a quite “low-level”, thus relatable, example of us feeling unwillingly absorbed in ourselves.

The strange way in which we are either directed towards the intentions that jump before our eyes or the moments we have just lived through,⁴⁰ we never really are in a *full* present. This being another argument for the embodied subject, one must recognize that we *can* be absorbed

³⁶ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 141

³⁷ Ibid. p. 147

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 168

³⁹ Ibid., p. 168

⁴⁰ Cf. Ibid., p. 168

in our body with our eyes wide open. It is not the sensory functions alone that make me *exist* in the world, even more one can be absorbed in one's body and suddenly realize that what is presented before my eyes is just a sensible envelope of men and things.⁴¹ And this experience can be extremely unpleasant, even uncanny.

Weirdly enough, the prior sort of experience might as well suggest again a separate existence of a detached mind: a separation of the inner “thinker” and the outer experiential “cover” of myself. Nevertheless, as Merleau-Ponty suggests rightly, the thoughts inside of ourselves are also always only silent recalls of already constituted and expressed thoughts that we first and foremost would not have without our bodily intentionality *towards* the world.⁴² And the only way of rendering our often-detached perception of the world anew is by rediscovering the body as the subject of the world.⁴³

On the level of the lived body the human subject is less an ‘I think’ than an ‘I am able’. In this way the lived body transcends the traditional distinction between body and mind.⁴⁴

2.1.2. The Lived Body

Although it might seem redundant to articulate this now, it is nevertheless important to emphasize the essentiality of a *lived* body for the embodied subject and its primordial qualities. Since the lived body's qualities operate before any level of language and expression with Merleau-Ponty, it is important to underline that the *thinking* of the body is one that on this very primary level only consists in engaging with the world in perception and action.⁴⁵ This is also the turning point for Merleau-Ponty's specific understanding of *operative* intentionality that, – compared to Franz Brentano's Act-Intentionality (the ancestor of phenomenology),⁴⁶ which was yet a *cognitive* relationship between subject and object – is to be understood as an pre-reflective *ontological* connection between subject and object (as there is *no* other way for the world to exist for me than through my bodily engagement with it).⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty's task of Phenomenology is therefore closely linked to his stance of this “embodiment of world” in its primordial form:

It does not involve trying to get back to the things themselves, as this is not possible, for the things themselves are shrouded in pre-reflective darkness. Rather it involves trying to

⁴¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 168

⁴² Ibid., p. 189

⁴³ Cf. Ibid. p. 2013

⁴⁴ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 13

⁴⁵ Cf. Ibid., p. 14

⁴⁶ Which was picked on by Edmund Husserl.

⁴⁷ Cf. Ibid., p. 14

shed light on what was already there before there was any light, on what is already in place such that our conscious experience is as it is.⁴⁸

And it is with the experiencing while painting that a lot of this “shedding some light” can be done. Moreover, the painter constantly prolongs their lived body to scratch on the boarder to this pre-reflective “knowledge” of the body: The painter in certain ways tries to get back to this state that we as individuals never have been in. Just as in the way we immediately or naively react to the observation of paintings serves as a proof that the trigger on this pre-reflective level certainly is pulled.

Turning to the next phenomenon it must yet be explained why we would have a reaction to that quiet dialogue with the painter in the first place, just as how an intrinsic motivation for the painter to articulate their findings is able to happen. Zooming out from the subject of experience we turn to the existence of the Other, or more generally Otherness in the next part of the chapter.

2.2. The Other, Otherness

As was shown with the dualistic attitude of the body as being seen and seeing, it seems as if at the heart of the human condition there is a dialogic element in place that nearly presumes an “Other”. However, as we were speaking of an embedded, embodied subject here, it is also clear that we are not analysing the subject from a metaphysical position as a detached consciousness. Rather it must be thought of as the Other having always already taken place “inside” of myself, as we learn the world with a body that is always already amongst other bodies.

To have a more precise glimpse of what was just said it might be important – coming from the subject – to acknowledge what Merleau-Ponty proposed to be the bonds that tie us together in one self-same world. It still appears vague how the position of the subject must be conditioned from a general perspective (as opposed to the own perspective). Merleau-Ponty therefore uses the term “institution” to depict the double-structure of the subject in the world. Antagonistic to the “constituting” subject – a subject that would be in all his actions always *establishing* towards the world – the “instituting” subject remains in his role always *open*, being that

[...] an instituting subject is able to coexist with another, because the instituted is not the immediate reflection of the activity of the former and can be taken up by himself or by others without a total re-creation being at issue. *Thus, the instituted exists between others*

⁴⁸ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 14

*and myself, between me and myself like a hinge, the consequence, and the guarantee of our belonging to one self-same world.*⁴⁹

This imbalance that seems to be working at the heart of this institution is thereby especially interesting: opposing the idea of an “constituted” and self-sufficient subject, the institution of the subject appears to be in a double state. On the one hand, it is constantly instituting something (as opening something up), but on the other hand, due to its stance in the world, it likewise always portrays a specific state that was instituted (may this be social, political etc.).⁵⁰ Hence, Merleau-Ponty is talking about it being the consequence and the guarantee for our belonging to one self-same world. Giving a parallel to painting here, Merleau-Ponty wrote in his essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” that Matisse was with his brush always aiming towards this open whole of his work in progress, bringing “[...] his brush toward the line which called for it in order that the painting might finally be that which it was in the process of becoming.”⁵¹ Having this as an analogy for the former, the institution of our subjectivity could be seen as the brush always aiming for the open world and thereby instituting (“manifesting”) certain aspects of the world at the same time.

2.2.1. Expression and Communication

Even so, it is still not explicit through which underlying structure we are virtually holding together this hinge. This lies in the quality of perception and subsequent thought (the recalling of perceptive experiences): these two properties of our being-in-the-world have the inherent character of being *expressive* and *communicable*. As Merleau-Ponty was going back to the notion of behaviour in his book “The Structure of Behaviour” he explained both perception and thought as being observable forms of behaviour and therefore modes of display.⁵² The reason of them being observable made them intrinsically expressive and communicable.

As proof of his Single “Syntax” he proposed to look at how this same general property of perception and thought was displayed and developed in quite similar modes of expression cross-culturally, although their content was different. Rather the difference in *content* is only due to the way certain modes of expression have been conventionalized in *one* culture because of a comparative horizon of similarities and differences of one particular artist and their relation to

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 43

⁵⁰ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 42

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”. Translation from the French Original by Richard McCleary: In: Johnson, Galen A.(eds.): *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. 1st Edition. United States of America: Northwestern University Press 1993, p. 83

⁵² Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 135

a broader cultural stock.⁵³ This nevertheless does not falsify how the general observation of similar *modes* of expression (may it be writing, painting, making music or simply talking) being developed cross-culturally, is valid. Conventionality only makes us used to a certain tone of expression. It seems important to underline how the mode of expression we are constantly in, is essential to us being instituting subjects. Because in the mode of expression, we are given to the other without concession.⁵⁴ Meaning that whatever worth I am giving to the expression or the judgment of another is likewise a question of how much worth I am giving it myself. We are bound in the state of expression, where neither me nor the other can be denied. Again, looked up on in the aspect of artistic experience, it must be acknowledged that a core condition for the appeal of a painting, a song, or a piece of literature is also always the other that is given to me in this dialectic way.

We are turning now from a general point of expression to the more particular term *communication*. Spoken *speech* is Merleau-Ponty's foundational basis for all other forms of expression but in being "the excess of our existence beyond natural being"⁵⁵ it also manifests itself in words, language, and concepts. There are two steps to be considered to explain why we as humans are then drawn to communicate at all. Firstly (as having been described in detail in 2.1.), our mere bodily condition and the ambiguous way in which we are embodied subjects enable us to move our bodies through the world and explore different perspectives of it. Through this we gain the ability to transcend ourselves and think of things "as if" from another perspective in recalling prior perceptions. This ability of an "as if" already constitutes an abstract Other as an Other in me. However, as there *are* other instituting embodied subjects in the world, it quickly becomes evident that the difference in bodies is also shaping their conscious experiences differently. Otherwise, we would all move and behave in the exact same way. Internalising this the desire to communicate is developed, as without any differences in idiom, viewpoint, or experience, we probably would not have this desire.⁵⁶ If there was not a lack of sense for us in the observation of the other, we would not try to somewhat communicate it. Jean-Luc Nancy (*1940) even described *every* exchange of signs as an anticipation of sense and as "[...] the promise or guarantee that what ought to come from the other alone and be or make sense only in, for, and by him will actually reach the other – as well as the other in me."⁵⁷

⁵³ Cf. Crowther, Paul: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision. A Post-Analytic Turn*. 1st Edition. Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic 2013, p. 22

⁵⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and Voices of Silence*, p. 110

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 203

⁵⁶ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 185

⁵⁷ Nancy, Jean-Luc: *A Finite Thinking*. 1st Edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003, p. 294/295

He even called *thinking* the “responsible praxis of sense”⁵⁸, emphasizing its aspect of responsiveness that already has to operate in the practice of formulating a thought – the other always being included in this process.

But contrasting the practice of communication as expressing thought through speech in a real dialogue, this dynamic strangely alters when it comes to painting. It seems salient for the observer to be included in an exchange of sense, where one of the interlocutors (the painter) is not present. This can be elicited from two perspectives, the one of the viewers and the one of the painters (who are also expressing sense without an interlocutor present). From the viewers’ viewpoint, the painting should not be thought of as a constituted artefact but as a “[...] work which reaches its viewer and invites him to take up the gesture which created it and, skipping the intermediaries, to re-join, without any guide other than a movement of the invented line (an almost incorporeal trace), the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible.”⁵⁹

From the other side of the spectrum, the painter’s Other is an Other that does not yet exist as it is the “œuvre” of the painting that is eliciting the public she or he is aiming at, meaning that the public the painter aims at is not yet given in the moment of painting.⁶⁰ This is especially interesting as it again brings the issue of visibility into context. The painter is someone always aiming beyond the Visible, yet with the tools of the Visible at hand. Thereby painter give away their agency in an oscillating manner between them and the visible world around them. It again presupposes the inherent dualistic structure of one’s own being-in-the-world with one’s body. Yet, it also emphasizes how there is a tension at issue when one is involved in aesthetic activity:

On the one hand, it is fuelled by the desire to access that which, at the heart of ourselves, is ‘not ourselves’. On the other hand, this desire causes painters to discover, within themselves and within their culture, forces that would resist them in this task. With these they must do battle if they are to create⁶¹

In other words: Whatever it is that usually holds people back to see and explore the Invisible, are cultural and psychological forces that are socially trained or inherited. But why is it exactly painting for Merleau-Ponty that has the unique force of shedding light onto our cultural embeddedness?

⁵⁸ Nancy: *A Finite Thinking*, Ibid., p. 297

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 195

⁶⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and Voices of Silence*, p. 110

⁶¹ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 242

2.2.2. Language, Thought and Perception

For Merleau-Ponty language, thought and perception are inherently related to each other just as body, movement and vision are for perception. Without delving too deep into his account on Language, it is nevertheless important to mention why painting specifically has such relevance for his Phenomenology in this interrelated trinity of notions.

As already described earlier with Nancy, every movement of thought is impacted by contact with others. And in the same all acts of language, however complex they might be, are always only an approximation of description of one's experience to another. Therefore Merleau-Ponty suggested that we shall "[...] rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text. [and rather understand] that the idea of complete expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive – that it is, if you wish, silence."⁶² Thus, we can never communicate our experiences in a fully transparent way.

If we now considered painting as a special kind of language, Merleau-Ponty proposed that it is a voice for exactly this silence that normal language cannot be. Even if we might not have any other way to react to it than with an expression of being mysteriously struck, fascinated, or baffled. Nevertheless, this reaction of ours displays that the voice of silence is reaching us somehow. However: what *are* these things we are not able to communicate otherwise? The Invisible (that will be explained in more detail in 2.3.) in short is quite literally all things that have in themselves no material reality in our world, for example perceptual qualities as light, depth, width, colour, just to name a few. Likewise, invisible features are also moods of seeing just as the emotions one is influenced by. All these things are usually qualities of perception that stay "walled up" in the separate life of each consciousness although they are "the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things"⁶³. It is no wonder therefore that the painter, by bringing these "invisible" ways of seeing into sight, remains in a strange state of peculiarity. Repeatedly: the dialogue of the painter with the Visible is discernible, which is, through the ambiguous condition of the body (see 2.1.) constituted as an inner, or more precisely, intra-corporeal phenomenon. The presupposition of intersubjectivity comes to light once more

⁶² Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and Voices of Silence*, p. 80

⁶³ Ibid. p. 68

[...] because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh,⁶⁴ being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, or being also a dimension and a universal.⁶⁵

How does this imply again that *communication* has always already taken place as a mode of perception and thought? Communication must be abandoned in its every-day ordinary understanding just as it must be acknowledged in *exactly* this way. Communication is the attempt of an Other conveying sense to me of something. Just on this level the Other is nature itself, the visible world, so to say: a dialogue in perception. “Cézanne, attempting to perceive the natural world as if for the first time, is reputed to have said that ‘the landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness’.”⁶⁶

Having described the essentiality of the Other as an underlying structure for perception, the final part of this chapter is ultimately dedicated to what it is, that we perceive: the world.

2.3. The Visible, the Invisible, the World

As a last general characterization before delving into painting exclusively it seems important to draw the emphasis once again on the *phenomenological* approach in its distinctiveness. Despite its prevailing denial of a determined external world, just as a disconnected conscious world, phenomenology’s goal is, in its most mundane way, an attempt to circumscribe and describe the intentional structures between us as embedded observers and the world we bring forward by moving in space and after all of that to reflect upon it. But the order is important here: The assumption about the described comes *afterwards*, just as the supposing of underlying experiential structures. Furthermore, the description as a philosophical methodology was even enforced by Merleau-Ponty as he saw the explanation of the world as a secondary goal. How world is first and foremost constructed for us is through description. And the description presumes the existence of embodied subjects and the primary dialectic relation with others. Moreover, the objects *in* the world are not a sum of objects, as objects of thought for us as thinkers but must be understood in their unity as *perceived things*, as perceived by several consciousnesses.

But what exactly is the perceived thing and what its unity? The notional “unity”, as Merleau-Ponty emphasized often, must be understood as opposed to the dissection science performs on

⁶⁴ The „Flesh“ for Merleau-Ponty is a “a sentient in general before a Sensible in general” – meaning that it is a certain ontological principle, whereby that what is perceived must be perceptible, so that it can “segregate” itself as a subject of perception. (cf. Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 83)

⁶⁵ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 216

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 132

objects of the world in categorizing and disassembling them. In the realm of our undivided existence, the world is “true”, it simply exists before us, just as it envelops us instead of being held and circumscribed by our mind.⁶⁷ Therefore also the perceived object/thing of our existence is first and foremost given in its “concrete” aspect. We do not observe a thing in our primordial existence as an object of observation, but we experience its qualities through our bodily embeddedness.

Nevertheless, this truth is perspectival. As we move around with our bodies, things in the world present themselves to us in a multitude of perspectives that are both indefinite just as non-exhaustively. Other than for objects observed in an intellectual (scientific) act, things in perspective do not have to be either possible or necessary in a certain way, which might even let them appear deformed sometimes.⁶⁸ And it is important to notice that this way of perceiving the world is something that develops by action. We could not have the sense of a thing as the thing, if we did not have the sense of it being something, that one comes across,⁶⁹ as it would be nothing but a rupture in our common experience at this point. It can be assumed that the sensorimotor skills of a child become unified by active engagement with phenomena which likewise makes them become intelligible for the child *at all*.⁷⁰ And by being intelligible they likewise become reachable in the world, where they were only arbitrary phenomena for us before. The phenomenon of attention is thereby quite exemplary. We always move through the world with a certain attentional quality. Through this a lot of things may seem invisible for us in a certain moment, because the flux of our experiential horizon would not flow in the way it does if we would experience every small detail of a common scene always at once and in full detail. It is therefore quite interesting how people are struck with the facts of change blindness⁷¹ or inattentional blindness⁷² as it elicits their beliefs about the seeming continuity of their consciousness to be upset.⁷³

Our consciousness always has the tendency to “reach” towards something in the world, whereby the attentional shift is not merely a quantitative move (from less to more) but a qualitative change from a mere potentiality to a concrete realisation.⁷⁴ Whereby the general

⁶⁷ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 53

⁶⁸ Cf. Ibid., p. 119

⁶⁹ Cf. Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 81

⁷⁰ Cf. Ibid., p. 81

⁷¹ Change Blindness is the phenomenon that occurs when a stimulus in visual perception undergoes a change, without the observer realizing its changing.

⁷² Inattentional Blindness is the phenomenon that occurs when there is an obviously visible change happening in a scene, that nevertheless remains unnoticed because of the awareness of the observer being directed elsewhere.

⁷³ Cf. Noë, Alva: *Action in Perception*. 1st Edition. Cambridge: MIT Press 2006, p. 54 & 58

⁷⁴ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 81

possibility of having these changes – once again – depends on how developed your sensorimotor skills are. The thesis now wants to turn to three key concepts that put the prior made assumptions in a nutshell.

2.3.1. Reversibility and the Perceptual Horizon

When we remember discussions on any subject, one may be surprised about how concepts are always interrelated with one another. When describing x, one also has to explain y or z and so forth. This interrelatedness of concepts can be broken down to simple perceptions as well. When one experiences something, one will realize that it usually always refers to something else: for Merleau-Ponty this depends on the key aspect of *Reversibility*. Where there is meaning of something, there is also always a background for this meaning, just as it is in perception: every perception takes place in a certain horizon and cannot be detached from it:

[...] we cannot apply the classical distinction of form and matter to perception, nor can we conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which ‘interprets’, ‘deciphers’, or ‘orders’ a sensible matter according to an ideal law which it possesses. Matter is ‘pregnant’ with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the ‘world’.⁷⁵

With this “pregnancy”, what is meant (again) is the perceptual necessity of the world for us. We cannot experience things in the world apart from their form in which we see them. We do not (again) interpret the world throughout a scientific (or other) proposal but experience it bodily. Bodily space is therefore the actual background for the object of our perception. And it is important to stress that this bodily space (or field) is a structured one. Our consciousness constantly wants to organize this space. But whereas the human organization of things in ideas and concepts is an intellectual act, the organization of things in perception is spontaneous,⁷⁶ an organization that, one could say, is taken up by painters often in the purest sense.

2.3.2. The Lived Object (vs. the Scientific Object)

Stemming from the prior, the spontaneous organization of things in perception asserts a “lived object”, opposed to the “scientific object” of exploration. Again: it should not be believed that the scientific way of looking at things is less valid; it has indeed a necessity to bring up the complexity of our world. Nevertheless, it did shape our thinking tremendously, so that in some ways it might be fruitful to come back to that primordial version of things as “lived” through perception. Merleau-Ponty writes in his Essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” that sciences of the human

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 116

⁷⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Cézanne’s Doubt*, p. 64

body made us distinguish between our senses.⁷⁷ On the one hand this is not a bad thing as it helped us explore certain specificities of the human body better and understand them in attempt to also assist malfunctioning of the same if necessary, as in medicine. On the other hand, it also separated us from our senses so that we are sometimes handicapped to help ourselves in understanding what our senses want or lack. With the invention of the *lived object* in Merleau-Ponty's analysis, he virtually changes the directions of explanation. It is not our understanding of our own senses that make us feel the smoothness, the softness, the depth (etc.) of a thing, but rather the perception of a thing makes these qualities develop in our bodies.

It is in the same way that we should read objects of art as distinctive kind of objects. Understanding them in pre-established art-historian or psychological terms is one thing; in another sense art objects are ought to awaken things in us that are bodily there but not recognized by ourselves just as they are able to create even new schemata of perception.⁷⁸

2.3.3. The Visible and the Invisible: Transperceptual Space

"The Visible and the Invisible" is primarily the last unfinished book by Maurice Merleau-Ponty which, could be argued, is in itself the most abstract one concerning the discussed terms and concepts. I will therefore set it into dialogue with Paul Crowthers critical stance on it in his book "Phenomenologies of Art and Vision".

As already mentioned before in chapter 2.2. in a footnote, Merleau-Ponty introduces the term "Flesh" as an ontological presumption for all Being: "[...] the flesh is the latency and the depth and the possibility of all presence and, for this reason, is never itself present, never itself visible."⁷⁹ This only said on a short note, the thesis thus wants to focus on the more concrete aspects of it, the emergences *from* it. In Merleau-Ponty's essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", he claims silence as the not-yet-formulated (but already *possible* in the realm of Flesh); in the same way, Merleau-Ponty sees the Invisible (as the not (yet) perceivable) as enveloping the Visible.⁸⁰ So theoretically everything that is yet *in* the Flesh of the Visible, has the possibility to become visible at some point. This approach is very interesting, but also very abstract. Merleau-Ponty gives us some idea but – with Crowther – is yet very vague regarding a concrete description of what the Invisible is:

1. What is not actually visible but could be (hidden or in actual aspects of the thing hidden things, situated 'elsewhere' – 'Here' and 'elsewhere')

⁷⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Cézanne's Doubt*, p. 65

⁷⁸ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 129

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 215

⁸⁰ Cf. Ibid., p. 210

2. What, relative to the visible, could nevertheless not be seen as a thing (the existentials of the visible, its dimensions, its non-figurative inner framework)
3. What exists only as tactile or kinaesthetically, etc.
4. ... the Cogito⁸¹

Although, these categories might give a glimpse on what Merleau-Ponty was on about, they yet remain rather unprecise. Paul Crowther criticized this as well and especially neglected Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "invisible". For him, the term was suggesting something very un-reachable and therefore transcendent. Another point of critique that could be made is that the use of the dual-term "invisible-visible" is prioritizing the sense of sight. As said in the introduction, this thesis will not go into more detail concerning other senses, but it should nevertheless be admitted that Crowther's definition could be adapted to other categories of senses apart from the capability of seeing. Crowther's alternative suggestion is therefore as follows:

[...] the full recognition of any three-dimensional item or state of affairs is not a simple 'atom' of recognition, nor is it the passive registering of some datum. It is enabled, rather, by the way in which perceptual recognition involves demarcating it from that myriad of items, states of affairs, qualities, relations and imagined possibilities that constitute not only the immediate surrounding perceptual field but its continuance in new vectors of detail as we change our position. To call this the 'invisible' seems rather narrow. It is both immanent in what we perceive, yet extends beyond it, in an unfathomable complexity. The term transperceptual seems much more fitting in relation to all this.

In taking up an analysis of painting, Crowther therefore defines five basic aspects of transperceptual space that seem important concerning visible items. In abbreviated form they are:

1. Spatial items, relations, or states of affairs which, under normal circumstance, are incompletely available to visual perception, or are unnoticed by it. [...]
2. Possible visual items, relations, states of affairs or life forms which might exist in physical and/or perceptual environments radically different from our usual one. [...]
3. Visual forms that *appear to be* variations upon recognizable kinds of things and/or their relations and spatial contexts without amounting to actual representations of them. [...]
4. Idealized variations on forms basic to visual perception's structural aspects – such as mass, volume, density, shape (especially geometrical), positional relations (such as 'in front of' or 'behind') and colour.

⁸¹ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 34/35

5. Visual correlates of specific states of mind. In formal terms, many visual forms in art can be characterized as expressions of specific kinds or clusters of emotion. [...] ⁸²

The reason that these categories are presented so formally here is also to show that Crowther's approach is just another way of approximating to the qualities that will be in the later contextualised in the emergent field of painting. Emphasizing this is *also* to say that there are a lot more variations one could think of and that there is no limit – also in painting – to develop techniques that try to catch these perceptual patterns, or in other words: to create new paths to enter this, that is not-yet-visible, ⁸³ hence transperceptual.

2.4. Painting as a Gesture of the Body – A Short Recap

To complete the previous analysis this final paragraph of the chapter shall recap what will be in essence the ground structure for understanding the second part of this thesis. Having defined the three broad categories in which to understand Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in more detail, it maybe should be emphasized why this is relevant in the case of painting. Firstly, this is because the following arguments will use the terms "embodied subject", "Other" or simply "world" a lot which is why it was necessary to clarify them in their phenomenological understanding. Secondly, it is necessary because the interrelatedness of subject, others and the world are intrinsic for the mere emergence of painting. Likewise, the three are somehow the theoretical points of connection for an intentional account on painting that will straddle between the three in multiple ways. One could say painting is somewhat the expression for these connections. This paper therefore also talks about painting as "gesture", meaning gesture in the quite literal sense of *expressing* an intention. The phenomenological approach is again not an account for explaining phenomena in a definite way but approximating them. The gesture of painting is not a "solution" for the ambiguities described in this chapter. At some point, Merleau-Ponty calls painting even a syntax itself, but one that centres around the physical act of painting in its spontaneous nature: it is a gesture "[...] bound up with the nature of human embodiment and learnable at an immediately accessible sensory level." ⁸⁴

And what makes painting thus a specific *immanent* practice is that it does not express things that are transcendent from us, but inherently *in* us (although maybe only in its possible character). And it is seen in the impact of any cultural practice that it *must* be somewhat immanent as it would be ineffectual as a practice otherwise. ⁸⁵

⁸² Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 38

⁸³ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 211

⁸⁴ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 110

⁸⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and Voices of Silence*, p. 105

3. The Body in the Practice of Painting

After establishing the phenomenological framework for this thesis in the first part of the paper, it is in the interest of the second half to explain, *why* and *how* painting as a bodily practice is portraying and reflecting the perceptual phenomenology that was introduced earlier. How painting is a junction of the experienced world and its borders that only come to life through the lived body, precisely the active engagement with a world that is permanent but likewise withdraws from us. The analysis of the subsequent chapter shall thus show how we – as being interconnected with the world in the same primordial way as the painter – gain new methods of approaching the world and learning to see it differently. This may yet sound a little abstract and it lies in the individual experience to really know *what kind* of new perspectives will be gained. However, this thesis wants to shed some light on what possible ways of seeing things differently there are and how this opening up of perspectives has something inherently liberating for the individual.

It will firstly be important to underpin the ground dichotomy for Merleau-Ponty when it comes to *thinking*, opposing the way we are intentionally directed towards the world with this “objectified”, “scientific” manner of thinking. This will be – for the painter – an intention-less intentionality that demonstrates a way of “painterly” thinking about the world. Now of course “scientific thinking” is not the only thinking that could be denounced. It likewise could be criticised how our world is undercut by social, ethical, political, or economic structures and concepts. Nevertheless, in Husserl’s original argument what is meant by this “scientific thinking” is not a separate sector of people with a specific realm of concepts. Rather, stemming from the critique of the increasing significance of Natural Sciences on all other areas of life, Husserl detected (spreading from those) an evolving desire to think “scientifically”, ergo objectively. Which again is not to be seen as a bad thing as it is fruitful for a lot of areas of thought. Nevertheless, the increasing objectification of other realms of thought up until this day – may this be social selective, cultural selective etc. – was only allowed by this “scientific attitude” (how Husserl called it). There would not be categorial thinking without categories in the first place. And this objectification of the world is a two-edged sword. It is on the one hand a compromise between many different embodied subjects, to have a consensus and establish concepts for a practical approach onto the world. On the other hand, it holds the world trapped in rigid framed and therefore also our thinking. Now thinking “painterly” will not be a solving for all irregularities and injustices in all kinds of different practices of society as it will not ever serve as (for example) a political strategy. Even so, this opening up, or reminding of realms of thought that *are* ambiguous and not reachable by objective detection, is important for keeping

a diversity of thought, a capability to “think otherwise”. The beauty in doing this by talking about painting – opposing to any “transcendental” philosophical theories or mystical beliefs – is that it turns us back to ourselves and our primordial constitution in a very *immanent* way. It is no wonder that a lot of us seek freedom in the experience of art. Because – consciously or not – it softens the edges of our knowledge a little. And the fact that we *enjoy* this experience of haziness, serves only as a strengthening for the argument that we did not lose all sense for that, which is not objectifiable in the scientific manner.

To emphasize this once more: This thesis does *not* want to present an alternative to scientific thought or in any way neglect the very same. In fact, it wants to show how the understanding of painting is bending the stiff borders of our perception and maybe will leave room for a little more anticipation of world (rather than “knowledge” of it).

However, the following analysis will – in the context of art-theory – also show an alternative way of thinking to the concepts of other, more “classical” art theories about painting, as a lot of them also stem from the same categorization practice enforced by an objectifying thought. All examples of paintings shown in the following section are only accompanying the ideas presented. They shall not be linked to any art-interpretations in an art-historian manner. Rather they serve as illustrations for the thoughts evolved in the chapter, so that anyone can read their own freedom from it.

It is a general goal for an art understanding like this to bring people back to that primordial sense of anticipation of the world (as described in length in Chapter 2) as opposed to a “knowing” of the world. Therefore the “imposing” quality of an approach that demands full knowledge is diminished as it stays in the subjective experience of the individual to take on the journey of anticipation. It is only an eliciting of something, already intuitively *there*. Hence the following can give hints and ideas where to start this journey. And this is beautifully reflected in the practice of painting, as it made this kind of world approach and the engaging with it (consciously or not) its profession. Painting is doing this in two very intermingled ways: firstly, it develops a distinct way of seeing, which will be at length discussed in the first chapter. Secondly, it is a *bodily* practice that stems a lot of its intuitive form of anticipating the Invisible from a continuous *habitual* practice. The analysis will then go on to describe two moods of painting that painters “find” themselves perceiving, while being immersed in the activity. Those again illuminate patterns of our consciousness that are at stake when not reflected. In the last part of the chapter – as a short “case study” – the thesis will depict two painters that serve as good example for the way the experienced moods of perception manifest themselves in a lifestyle of painting.

3.1. The Intentionality of the Painter

Intentionality as the source for philosophical insight is the great differentiation phenomenology incorporated into the discussion of where to find the real “truths” of the world in philosophy. Other than building upon rational principles of the mind or trying to understand the outside world objectively, phenomenology centred its analyses on *how* things appear to us. This replicated, it is – also in the phenomenological discussion of painting - first and foremost a discussion on the special intentional relationship from the painter to the world. Nevertheless, this intentionality will never be a “closed-up” field to analyse as it always resides in one’s subjective world and could never be an impersonal description of how “one” paints.⁸⁶ Rather, it shall always be something that can only add-up to an even fuller account, the more paintings are produced. Still, there is a possibility in making certain “general assumptions” on the intentionality of painting that will be elicited in this chapter.

Firstly, this will be the general way, on how this intentionality is enacted in the primal way, namely by *looking* out into the world. This looking being in its special way “without intentions” (in the every-day use of “intention”). To clarify: The intentionality that is discussed here, is a *general* structure of cognition and not something that only happens by will. We are intentionally connected with everything in the world: every perception, every thought, every other. The intentionality is always *there*. Opposing to the every-day notion of “intention” (as having a specific “will” towards something) it will be clear within this first level of explaining the intentionality in *looking* that an intention-account in the every-day notion of the word would not be enough for painting. “The view, then, that painting results from a process of realising a series of intentions thus fails hopelessly to account for the actual phenomena of painting.”⁸⁷

Secondly, we will talk about how the intentionality of painting is something habitually and bodily practiced and internalized. And thereby also that the possibilities in learning to intentionally comprehend the world “otherwise” are accessible in each one of us.

And thirdly, we will deal with how, whilst recognising the invisible parts of the world, patterns of our conscious experience are revealed that give enlightening insights on what patterns are manifested through our unreflected way of Being-in-the-world.

It is also to note that the three cornerstones developed with Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 2 always appear as co-constituting for this practice and somewhat stand parallel to the three “levels” of intentionality discussed in the later. The *embodied subject* as the locus of perception – the *Other*

⁸⁶ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 18

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8

as the set-into-dialogue of painting – the *invisible world* (transperceptual space) as the always possible “Beyond”.

3.2. The Painter’s Gaze

The modes of seeing that the thesis wants to elicit, are so hard to circumscribe due to their subjective imprint that an analysis of the same must rather try to proceed in the negative: namely, by claiming what kinds of seeing are *not* meant by it. Nevertheless, the following distinctions are obviously relevant concerning the art experience from the viewers’ side, which thus is a different discussion. This paper wants to come closer to what it is that *the painter* is making visible, and how in the same, perception indeed is an active and creative act by itself.

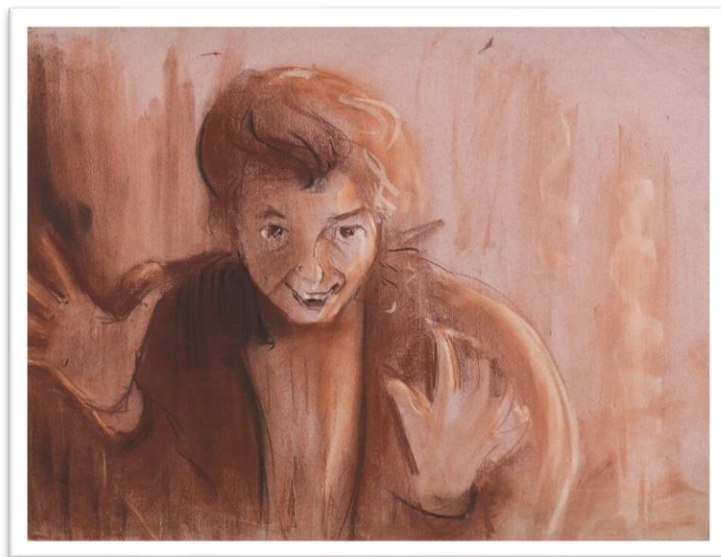


Fig. 1 Paula Modersohn-Becker: „Selbstbildnis mit gespreizten Händen“, 1897

3.2.1. The Different Ways of Seeing

Eva Schürmann makes a quite illuminating primal distinction on what kinds of seeing we are capable of in her book “Sehen als Praxis”⁸⁸ in which she claims three broad categories.

1. Syntactic seeing as a “seeing as” meaning the most cognitive pristine capability of being able to see forms, shapes, contours etc.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ English Translation: „Seeing as a practice “

⁸⁹ Cf. Schürmann, 2008, p. 70

2. Semantic seeing as a “seeing in”⁹⁰ meaning that you would see something-as-something endowed in a context of meaning, like for example when you see something *in* the clouds that is not there.⁹¹
3. Pragmatic seeing as certain moral/practical way of seeing, meaning the way we see to understand the shared consensus of the world with others that makes us “capable” to move within the world and its concepts.⁹²

To narrow down the three categories to the terminology of Merleau-Ponty and the context of this thesis, it is firstly enlightening to recognize that most people would surely understand the reasons for categorizing the three in this exact way. The first (syntactic seeing) is something one could biologically retrace in understanding how certain synapses in our brain work, so that we would not see a fully blurred world or a world in black and white (as for example loads of animals do). The third one (pragmatic seeing) is most probably something we would decode by understanding the psychological traces of how our culturally and socially contextualized behaviours of learning and developing skills behave. And the second one (semantic seeing) is probably the one, we would be most curious about as it is somewhere determined in the subconscious realm of all the things that are leftovers of the third category and therefore are somewhat differently processed. The second one is most probably also the one category most viewers of art experience would commit to, as it extends the context of syntactic seeing but somewhat still lies “beyond” a purely pragmatic seeing. It is nevertheless wrong to assume the same for the painter, and also is not what this thesis wants to elicit. In fact, all of the three prior categories have a valid stance in a psychological analysis, but no relevance for painting as it is discussed in this thesis, because all three of them conduct their stance from the “scientific attitude”, an objectified seeing. They are only proof on how our seeing *is* in fact directed by the attitude of objectifying the world around us constantly.

To extend the prior categories with Merleau-Ponty, one must understand what the “invisible” or “transperceptual” aspects are that made one see in these categories in the first place.

In the context of syntactic seeing, we see forms and contours *because* our eyes learned to depict them – in fact, it is the underlying transperceptual (See 2.3.3.) mechanisms, like light, relation or colour that make us “see” lines or “see” forms. These categories are not visibly graspable by themselves but are presupposing all other forms.

⁹⁰ For the English translation, the terminology by Woll is used, who depicted this in the manner of “seeing something *in* surfaces” f. ex.

⁹¹ Cf. Schürmann, Eva: *Sehen als Praxis. Ethisch-ästhetische Studien zum Verhältnis von Sicht und Einsicht*. 1st Edition. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 2008, p. 72

⁹² Cf. Ibid., p. 73

In the same way – although in a little more complicated manner – one could hold the same argument also for semantic or pragmatic seeing. The most primordial way of describing semantic seeing with Merleau-Ponty is our human capability of the “as if”. Being embedded in a world that is “othered” from the first moment of our lives, it is only logical that people develop a sense of meaning. And in this process of finding shared meaning (as in having a common understanding of something) one will also experience variations of that meaning due to the density of specific subjective transperceptual qualities that do not dispose of a fixed parameter because of their subjectivity. It would therefore be useful to distinguish two kinds of “seeing - in”: one that is *primordial* and prior to representation, as “[...] one can see something ‘in’ surfaces that neither are, nor are believed to be, representations [just as] our ancestors probably experienced it long before they were able to create representations”⁹³(for example if one would “see” the presence of “something” unidentified in a room or if one would see a formal entity in a wall that is not referring to anything specific). And secondly one (also often used to circumscribe one’s personal experience of a work of art) that is already embedded in a wider context of objectified meaning and concept and therefore *representational* (for example that one would see the concept “cat” in a cloud or the concept “face” in a more abstract painting).

To extend the third category – pragmatic seeing – with Merleau-Ponty, one must think it more historically, as the concepts and patterns it is endowed in are quite complex and hard to transcend from. Nobody will discard the fact that our understanding of the objective world is shaped culturally. Nevertheless, exactly this fact makes it hard to understand the transcendence of it. How shall we make use of the “as if”, if our thinking and perceiving is so entrenched in the very norms and concepts we have learned? It might be useful to come back to the term of “Gestalt” here in an historical context: a lot of the major cultural, societal, political, or even scientific shifts did not emerge in a linear order. Rather it was a sum of singularities that then produced a new Gestalt of thinking (and therefore transformation of perception) that could not a hundred percent be explained by disassembling all its singular parts. It was – so to say – transperceptual, but still the ground for its emergence.

3.2.2. Seeing “in terms of”

In having extended the categories chosen by Schürmann, the thesis now wants to suggest a further category that explicitly is important for the painter’s gaze and significantly rendered by our bodily constitution. The notion is already suggested by Merleau-Ponty himself in his essay “Eye and Mind” but then taken up by Nigel Wentworth and his book “The Phenomenology of

⁹³ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 16

Painting”. And this is – in rejection of a straightforward-seeing – the usage of the idea of “seeing in terms of”⁹⁴ something or as Merleau-Ponty called it “seeing according to, or with it.”⁹⁵

This notion of seeing is opposing a notion that keeps the things in a quasi-analytical perception, that could be stripped down to some essence, detectable by the mind. As a phenomenological approach, the idea of seeing “in terms of” the things respects the perspectivism of us as embodied beings towards a world that is never seen from the same position. Just as it *touches* the things in perception without disassembling them:

The common sense understanding of perception is that we see things as they are. What we see is there independent of us; in opening our eyes we simply see it as it is. Therefore, in coming to see tonal spectra, he did not see it before, the painter is simply coming into an awareness of something that was already there, he was just not aware of it. This implies that we experience a world that is, in itself unaffected by us. We only have to look, however, to notice that the way we fix on things affects what we see.⁹⁶

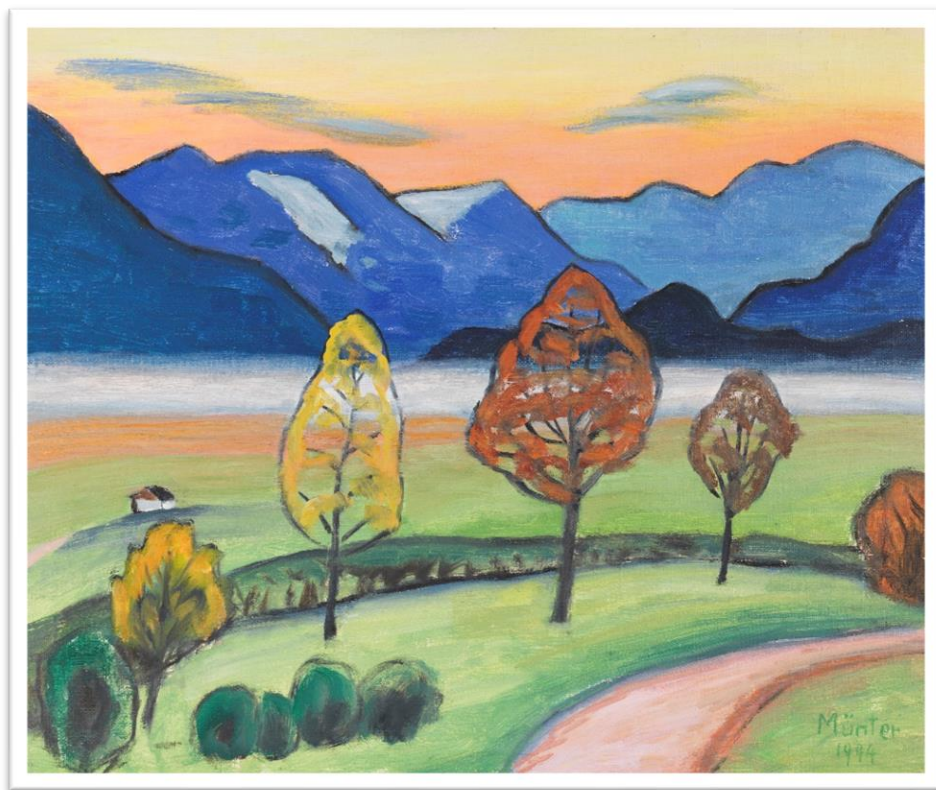


Fig. 2 Gabriele Münter: „Moor im Herbst (Berglandschaft mit Nebelstreif)“, 1944

It is necessary to emphasize also with Wentworth again that the seeming continuity of the conscious experience of our perception in an accustomed surrounding is something we have

⁹⁴ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 83

⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, p. 126

⁹⁶ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 57

trained in a distinct pattern: the world exists in the way it exists for us because we have learned and internalised to see it that way. Small ruptures of our day-to-day experience can sometimes remind us of the fact how unreflected we have been to certain perceptual patterns. And to look at it from the other side, if the perceived world were independent from us, then all of our perception *would* be consistent, and all objects would always look the same way.⁹⁷ But they do not. And even if they seem to look the same, it is easy to foil this by zooming into it and shifting one's awareness. This perspectivism of aspects of the perceived world is also inexhaustible in its variations. The "normal" embedded observer does certainly not pay too much of attention to these little changes in perception as it would make his or her being in the world a very discontinuous one. It is a practical mechanism of the brain that we usually keep up this *narrative* structure of experience (See 3.3.). The painter thus makes the ambivalences and varieties of perception their profession. This kaleidoscopic nature of the world, always shifting, always re-forming, provokes a way of sensing this "fabric" we are tied into so that the world becomes almost tangible.⁹⁸

3.2.3. Pictorial Looking

Coming from the discussion of different ways to circumscribe seeing, the thesis will suggest the term "pictorial looking" as being a sort of trained way of the former way of seeing "in terms of something". As reviewed in the last section, the way of "seeing in terms of something" is an immanent and implicit way of looking onto something that would be already there if we just focused on it. Nevertheless, sharpening one's awareness, painters develop this sense of seeing in training their gaze. The dialogical structure of the world becomes nearly a principle for the painter in the way of giving up agency in who is engaging with whom. Being assured that there is no final disclosure of the world, the painters know that they are painting from a specific position, and also that their way of pictorial looking will differ immensely from other painters. There is not *one* form that a painter will develop, and it also lies massively in the context of a social realm – so to say the particular embeddedness of the painter – which new aspects will become visible. A general theme is, though, that pictorial looking is always a world *opening* and that at the heart of each art-historic period the key aspect was always to make "[...] an initial visibility of everyday reality only more visible, by rendering the constitutive conditions of the Visible themselves *knowable* and *visible*."⁹⁹ Instead of our every-day ways of looking (as

⁹⁷ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 57

⁹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 58

⁹⁹ Stenger: *From Cézanne's Doubt to Ai Weiwei*, p. 291

described in 3.2.1), pictorial looking has the distinct characteristic of “penetrating things”¹⁰⁰, meaning that instead of only seeing them, one can seemingly zoom into the “roots” of things. This nevertheless does not imply that there is some final closed-up truth about them that we could engage with. It stays in perspective, but this perspective can take on the shape of indulging in the objects.

3.2.4. Corporal Looking

We would not see anything if our eyes did not give us the means of catching, questioning and giving form to an indefinite number of configurations of space and colour. We would not do anything if our body did not enable us to leap over all the neural and muscular means of locomotion in order to move to the goal.¹⁰¹

As everything in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has its locus in the body, it is – although it might seem obvious – important to underline that pictorial looking is one that is intrinsically corporal. That said, it is a looking that interconnects the movement of the body with the visual in all its transperceptual qualities. Very much, again, it opposes the quality of a scientific looking that seeks for the object-general, the way things in the world stand in front of ourselves as measurable entities. And retroactively this objectively affected kind of seeing transforms the body and our belief about the same into an information machine, only processing but not actively creating. The painter thus finds in their way of seeing back to the *actual* body, the one that he or she will call their own, a sentinel standing quietly at the command of their words and their acts.¹⁰²

Another way to look upon the co-constituting connection between body, movement and vision lies in the way how one’s movements are the “maturation of vision”¹⁰³, meaning that we develop a sense for the Visible by moving, continuously *advancing* our perspectives. We do not need a mind to tell our body where to take the next step: “[...] my body moves itself; my movement is self-moved. It is not ignorance of a self, blind to itself; it radiates from a self.”¹⁰⁴ This again brings up the point about the subjective embeddedness of the body in the embodied subject.

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *Cézanne’s Doubt*, p. 67

¹⁰¹ Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and Voices of Silence*, p. 114

¹⁰² Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, p. 122

¹⁰³ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 124

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124

3.2.5. Secret Visibility and Expressive Perception

Another salient notion asserted by Merleau-Ponty is that consciousness is neither a collocation of bodily parts, nor an emergence from somewhere transcendental but indeed founded in the dialogue between body and world:

A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the sensing/sensible is lit [...]¹⁰⁵

And it is in the core of this “conversational” character that Merleau-Ponty also sees the interchange between manifest and secret visibility confirmed. Or in Merleau-Ponty’s words: “Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them.”¹⁰⁶ This echo is what Merleau-Ponty names “secret visibility” and what comes through expressive perception. Because other than a passive receptor, the echo that is caused by the transperceptual qualities of visibility is a productive one, rather than an uninvolved one. It happens in a body that is situated and involved in a world at its subjective stance. And it is normal, that we would usually not reflect too much upon these expressive characteristics of our perception as we have learned the patterns of our objective situation in the world. We simply could not perform adequately, if we were immersed in these expressive qualities. Nevertheless, it lies within the nature of painting that these deep levels of experience beyond the visual (that nevertheless frame visibility) can be refined and elaborated in the practice of painting.¹⁰⁷

3.2.6. Painting as a Phenomenological Seismograph

But how would painting now be in its visual roots a prolonging of this expressive perception, this pictorial way of looking? First and foremost, it is the character of this secret visibility (or our always expressive kind of perception) that combats a perception on visibility that remains representative. Painting does not represent anything but rather brings the distinct characteristics of expressive perception into sight, “[...] by breaking the skin of things to show how things become things, how the world becomes world.”¹⁰⁸ So to say: The transperceptual qualities of our experience that generate our world are made explicit in painting (obviously always only in an approximation).

¹⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, p. 125

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 125

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 17

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty in Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 141

Painting, therefore, is a supreme expression of the *holistic logic of the perception of Being* – the fact that all the aspects of reversibility/flesh mutually imply one another.¹⁰⁹

Which ultimately provokes a final aspect of the painterly looking as contradictory to the scientific looking: when we look at things objectively in a sense of usability, we always try to possess them somehow with our sight. We view them *as if* fully transparent and want to *dominate* them for our purpose. The painter on the other side wants to look “in terms of” the things, wants to exactly break this possessiveness and thereby most faithfully comes close to the things “themselves” in their perspectivism (although this should not be mistaken for some final “truth” of things). The pictorial looking allows the painter to give things the hollow, the free space they ask for in return for the resonance that they require – it follows the own movement of things.¹¹⁰ And this happens also by being aware of the transperceptual properties that they are entangled in that make them subjective to us. By acknowledging how certain

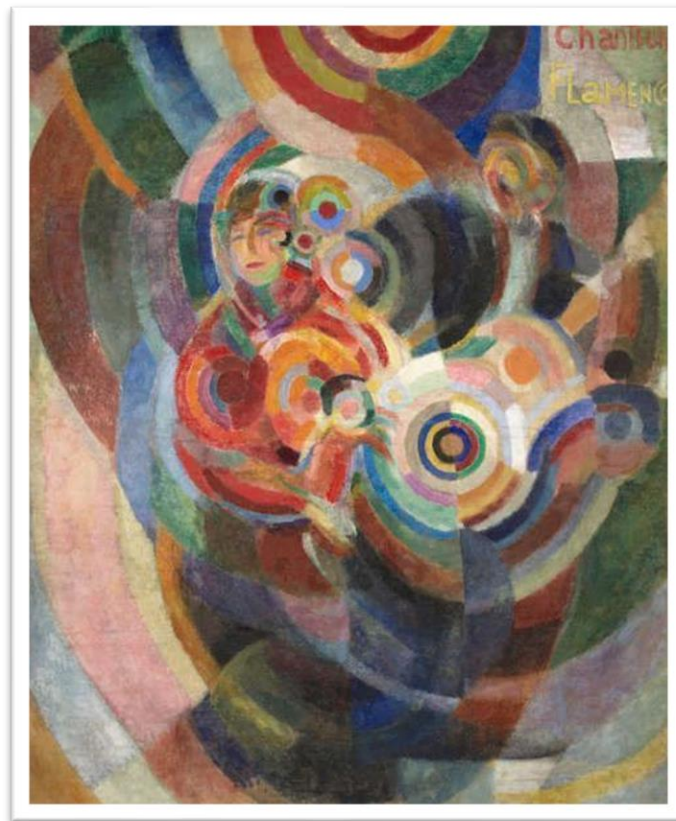


Fig 3 Sonia Delaunay: „Flamencosängerinnen (Großer Flamenco)“, 1915/16

aspects of visibility make the world subjective for us, painters likewise give freedom back to the things themselves.

¹⁰⁹ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 92 → Flesh and Reversibility are explained as concepts in more detail in 2.3.1. and 2.3.3.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 261

Accordingly, another very distinct aspect of visibility in painting is to acknowledge that whatever subjective, visible intentions might have motivated the work, they have undergone a transformation when they have finally reached the canvas – Picasso did not actually *see* the world fractured but rather tried to present what made the things visibly accessible in the first place.¹¹¹ The visible accessibility of things – the *potential* ways of any subjective seeing – is what the painter is actually *presenting*. And this is what opposes most semantic-based art theories: pictures should not be seen as being the attempt of representation of fully accessible things in the world, but rather as the presenting of potential visibilities.¹¹²

Perception stylizes because it cannot help but to constitute and express a point of view at the same time that it is the condition for revealing a world that inevitably transcends it.¹¹³

3.3. Painting as a Habitual Practice

Re-evaluating Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *lived body*, being the experiential vessel of how we experience ourselves *as* ourselves, one must frame the lived body of the painter as a particular one. One that is very much shaped by the different ways of looking into the world and then by realizing this in the practice of painting. And as much as every other lived body, the special coming-to-world of the painter's body is necessarily *habitual*: it is shaped by the engagement with the world: by *practice*. It is at the core of this thesis *how* this practice of painting, this making visible of world, is essentially generated by the bodily constitution and definition of the painter's being-in-the-world. And this being-in-the-world does not exclusively involve the looking, but of course also the commitment to tools and the actual bringing-to-canvas as a body that moves and acts upon.

It will therefore be the goal of this chapter to show, how the involvement with tools and the bodily engagement in the practice could be broken down phenomenologically. We will also associate the way that perceptual knowing translates into habitual knowing and how there is a certain state of flux that is phenomenologically especially interesting as it demonstrates that primordial connection between body, movement, and vision. In the last part of this chapter the thesis will turn to a more subjective aspect, concretely the aspect of style as one *particular* world the painter opens within the universe of painting.

¹¹¹ Cf. Singer, Linda: "Merleau-Ponty on the concept of style": Ted Toadvine (Eds.): *Merleau-Ponty. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers. Volume 1: Merleau-Ponty's contemporaries and the phenomenological tradition*. 1st Edition. Oxon: Routledge 2006, p. 211

¹¹² Cf. Schulz: *Ordnungen der Bilder*, p. 68

¹¹³ Singer: *Merleau-Ponty and the concept of style*, p. 217

3.3.1. Painting Tools and the Being of Painting

Just as phenomenology on a “global” level does not want to establish a distinction between objective and subjective subject matters when it comes to an experience of world in general, it certainly neither wants to do the same in a more particular realm. Nigel Wentworth uses a phenomenological explanation model to describe objects-in-use of a painter, like the brush, the canvas, or the paint. Synonymously, he thereby speaks of the “phenomenal objects” or in a more practice-oriented way, the “experiential objects”, describing these terms as being used

[...] for those things that occur on the pre-reflective level of experience and can only be understood in terms of their meaning. A phenomenal object that is given in relation to the lived, or meaning, structures involved in a man’s being-in-the-world.¹¹⁴

This said it is important to not confuse the “objective” meanings of these objects as we would understand them in a scientific attitude, but we rather must understand them right out of the context they are *used* in. Although this thesis implies most paintings up from arising modernist movements from the beginning of the 20th century upwards, this mere fact – the phenomenological use of painting tools – could be applied for any period of painting. It is even particularly interesting to look at this in a historical perspective, as the social realm of one particular time always influenced the experiential qualities of the phenomenological tools in painting. It is how certain art styles from certain periods manifested themselves in specific historical epochs in the first place and why accordingly, the manner of painting of different painters in a specific period will coincide, due to their “phenomenal brushes”.¹¹⁵

As already said in the prior section on the painter’s gaze (3.2.6.), what is shown in a painting is a reflection on the potential visible accessibilities of things. Likewise, a similar argument can be made for the actual *making* just in more consequence: the potentiality that lies in the paint *before-use* would only *be* a potentiality if there was a paint-on-canvas *after-use*. “Only in the realisation of these potentialities [...] the difference between them becomes apparent.”¹¹⁶ Potentialities are so-to-say inherently understood within the practice. But the variety of potentialities – in this sheer expressive state of painting – can only be learned by doing. The exercising of painting is therefore the only way to get to know the possibilities of forms, lines, and colours to even express these “potential visible accessibilities” discussed in the prior. It is one thing to acknowledge that there are transperceptual qualities of the world we perceive, but another learning ways to express them. It is therefore also no wonder that potentialities extend

¹¹⁴ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 31

¹¹⁵ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 34

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 39

and transform over time with practice and that some might work better than others. Just as the perceptual knowledge (pictorial looking) of the painter is a *habitual* knowledge, the potentialities of the painter in the actual practice with her tools used are always *experiential* ones, understood within the practice *as a body*.

This is where it gets interesting to come back to the ambiguous stance of the body for ourselves. It is likewise a locus of action that we believe to commit to consciously, but also a receptor of the world that reacts seemingly unwillingly. This belief obviously stems from our inner objective separation of body and mind but is interesting to look upon again in the context of painting. What we usually consider as mere “unwilled” reflexes of our bodies are nevertheless habitual reactions that our body “trained”, most of the times without our awareness (for example certain reactions as fear or other strong emotions, where our body seemingly reacts before our conscious knowledge of it). This on the other side shows us that we cannot control every building-up of bodily reaction fully willingly. Certain actions that we might assume as consciously chosen might have a much deeper embedded bodily cause. Sometimes one could even admit to having “a bad feeling” about something that he or she could not make more explicit. Most of the times this is a bodily intuition that roots us back to our primordial embeddedness with the world. The reason to recapitulate this here is because painting as a practice somehow positions itself exactly on the border between “the levels of mere reflex and full pre-mediated action”¹¹⁷ and therefore serves as good metaphor for the ambiguity of each and everyone’s body. The painter, though, nearly advances this ability to be on this middle line *for their profession*. And being on this borderline, it also implies that the final product might as well have the same ambiguous character as the practice itself: “Whether the artist seeks to accentuate or to repress his point of view, his work appears to him both as perniciously autfigurative and alien.”¹¹⁸ (This special affiliation of moods will be elaborated on in chapter 3.4.) The painter therefore nearly serves as a “medium” for this peculiar stance of the body.

But what is this particular “being” that is exposed in painting and that the painter experiences bodily? Compared to other activities more dedicated to the objective realm of the world, painting is not only an activity, a work, a very basic praxis but also a way of life: “Painting is not something a painter does, leaving him afterwards the same person he was before, but an aspect of his being, a dimension of his being-in-the world.”¹¹⁹ And how could it be different?

¹¹⁷ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 43

¹¹⁸ Singer: *Merleau-Ponty and the concept of style*, p. 211

¹¹⁹ Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 45

As painting has this immensely strong outlook of being world-presenting in its primordial aspects from the point of view of *a* body, the practice itself nearly must have the effect of transforming the painter's lived body. Painterly thinking – understood in the sense of this thesis – is a way of thinking with the whole body and thereby a way of thinking one could not objectively turn down. Of course, this does not entail that painters are not capable of seeing scientifically. Rather it is a proof of why there has always been such a strong affinity between science and arts. One is likely to see the objective realms of our thinking much clearer if one allows for this free way of thinking painterly to unfold. It lies in the heart of painting that the reflexive aspect of it can only occur through a trained body: a body that is trained in seeing the transperceptual but also a body that is habituated with its tools for achieving to express these *yet* invisible qualities of world.

3.3.2. Divergency in Painting: The Flux-State

Although this is for sure not an observation that could only be made upon painters, also in the world of painting, artists often speak of a certain “drive” or “state of flux” that they are in while exercising their art. Meaning that there is a moment in practicing where the conscious experience is likely to shift away from an objectifying mode of holding onto intentions towards a free flow of gestures. In this particular moment of painting the specific action (meaning: one particular brush stroke or a series of actively forming expressions) is somewhat driven by a combination of the (trained) perception and a certain need or desire to act upon the former, both of which are not chosen consciously as an active will at each moment.¹²⁰ And it might be that sometimes this state of free-flow only lasts for the blink of an eye, maybe a dot of colour, while in other painter's practices, whole works of painting might come into presence due to one big gesture in this state of flux. However long this “drive” lasts, it is characterised by an inherent tension of repetition and innovation,¹²¹ meaning that it always reflects or repeats patterns that are “pre-mediated” or habitual, as it simultaneously organises them anew. Thinking back of what was said in chapter 2.1.1., as in the body, there is an interplay between presence and absence in painting: the absence of awareness of a habitual body that reacts and the presence of a body that is engaged in active enquiry of the potentialities laid out in front of it. Hence, painting must be thought of as a divergent activity, as it always oscillates between these two states.

¹²⁰ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 48

¹²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 51

3.3.3. Style and Perspective

As stated from the very beginning, this thesis rejects the idea that there ever could be a generalized account of painting even in this phenomenological approach. Nevertheless, one could see that this perspective on painting – according to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas – does allow for an approximation on why the activity of painting would tell us something about our bodily embeddedness and its constitutive correlation with our world. However, it is also observable that for any person with no specifically elaborated knowledge about art theory, not every painting “scratches” this underlying primordial feeling in us the same way. There are differences in styles of paintings and there are differences in reactions. Without making any generalized assumptions about subjectivity here, one must look at the concept of style as a cause for meaning.

The thesis has discussed the importance of the Other and otherness in painting in detail in the first part of the paper. To recapitulate, there lies an essentiality of dialogue in the response to a painting, that counts for both sides. Whether that be the silent dialogue between the viewer and the painting, or the non-specific Other for the painter that their painting is approaching to. There is a need for a dialogic structure to allow for meaning to happen, to experience these new ways of seeing. Through the specific style of a painter (as the manifest continuation of the painter’s perception) our eyes are guided across a work’s surface:¹²²

“[...] it testifies to the human capacity to wrest significances from the world and to transform them into a mode of access and illumination which transcends the particularities of its origin.”¹²³

It is very interesting to locate that the subjective realm of painting lets us transcend from these particularities in the first place. There is seemingly – again – an intertwining between the practice itself and its consequences. The potentialities only come to light through engagement. The subjective style of a painter only comes alive because the painter is lending their body to the world, thereby translating this very world into painting.¹²⁴ This strongly opposes once again the idea of a detached mind that is not bodily committed to the world. We would not experience the signs that we recognize in the way we do if we did not form our world the way we do by trespassing it with our bodies. There is a reason why for one person the same experience of something is beautiful, while it may be terrifying for the other. We perceive signs in different ways, whether that is a linguistic entity or a ray of light (as of more importance for the painter).

¹²² Cf. Singer: *Merleau-Ponty and the concept of style*, p. 210

¹²³ Singer: *Merleau-Ponty and the concept of style*, p. 210

¹²⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, p. 123

Therefore, it is no wonder that different painters respond differently to these signs and therefore find different forms of expressing them. Nonetheless, style always only is the “actualization of the possibility of expression”,¹²⁵ meaning that there is no final knowledge of how to translate certain signs, since there is always more variety. After all, painting always lives in the perspectivism that Merleau-Ponty exclaimed, and style is always “an affective or modal consequence of an embodied point of view”¹²⁶. Just in the same way this point of view is nothing “chosen” by a mind. It unfolds within a continuous practice and will always have a certain mysterious element to it as it must remain open. This openness is regarded to the Otherness of world that it must conform to. Any painting that was purely self-referential would be unintelligible.¹²⁷ Therefore style again has a two-component structure: on the one hand, it

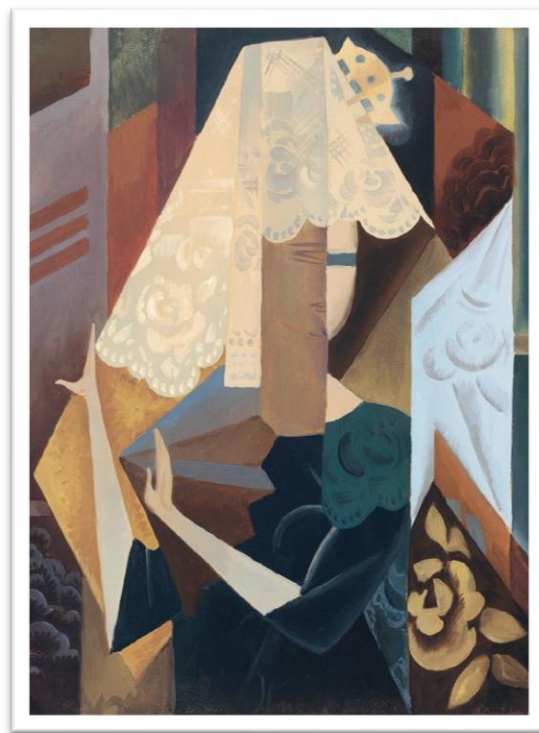


Fig. 4 Natalja Sergejewna Gontscharowa:
„Espagnole“, 1918-1920

gives the subjective painter a certain project with direction;¹²⁸ on the other hand, it must remain open for the Other to conceive. This is also why certain artists might have found their audience decades or centuries after their death, while other painters might have had a short light-up at a specific moment in time and then seemingly vanished from the surface. It is a difficult task to walk on the thin line between what is visible and what is invisible.

¹²⁵ Singer: *Merleau-Ponty and the concept of style*, p. 211

¹²⁶ Singer: *Merleau-Ponty and the concept of style*, p. 214

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 213

¹²⁸ Cf. Ibid., p. 216

Even so, the concept of a (subjective) style only elicits how world is not exclusively detectable on the outside in an objectifying manner but surely something, which we individually develop in a “sense of world” or how Merleau-Ponty called it “true thought”. What makes painting so beautiful as a gesture and expression of this true thought is that it is (opposing to other art forms) “[...] learnable at an immediately accessible sensory level”¹²⁹ and at the same time “[...] bound up with the nature of human embodiment”¹³⁰. Painting is a syntax between world and body, exploring its ambiguities, not solving, but expressing them. It is at the core of the next chapter to shed light on, what this thesis will assert to be, the two “main” states of our primordial being-in-the-world that are normally concealed by the structures of our consciousness but are often portrayed in painting: expression and alienation.

3.4. Moods and Patterns

Before leaning into the coming chapter, it shall be forwarded how the following information should be depicted. It is information that, much like other things stated in this thesis, cannot be understood as a “*this is exactly* how it is” while painting, but much more as only an approximation to what the painter might experience in this state of bodily flux that is not discernible for painters themselves. One could nearly say that the following is only just another assumption made *upon* the painter’s experience. And this is not fully opposable but was in fact stated multiple times throughout this thesis: that all of this congregates in the observation that the whole phenomenology by Merleau-Ponty or this bodily approach on perception is nothing that shall be objectified as it opposes the scientific attitude. Just as *every* talking about the practice of painting, the experience of painting or the experience of observing painting is only a verbal reflection of the actual experience (just as is this thesis). Nevertheless, this thesis tried and will try to understand *why* that might be. And it will be in the following chapter to explicate phenomenologically how the sense of our primordial human inherence can be experienced especially well by those who cast aside the structures of our linguistic embeddedness. And how – with Merleau-Ponty – this voice (as painting) is that of silence, of the invisible, of the transperceptual or of the yet-to-come.

Painters are immersed as anyone else in a lifeworld that always imposes this objectifying thinking upon us. It is therefore essential to understand that painters do not have a detached transcendental ability by looking “beyond”. They must “break-free” from these structures just as anyone else would through bodily practice. And this happens by training the body in a special

¹²⁹ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 110

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110

way for this distinct sensibility (see 3.3.). The real question for the subsequent analysis therefore is: *what* are they breaking-free from and what will this finding might say of how we observe

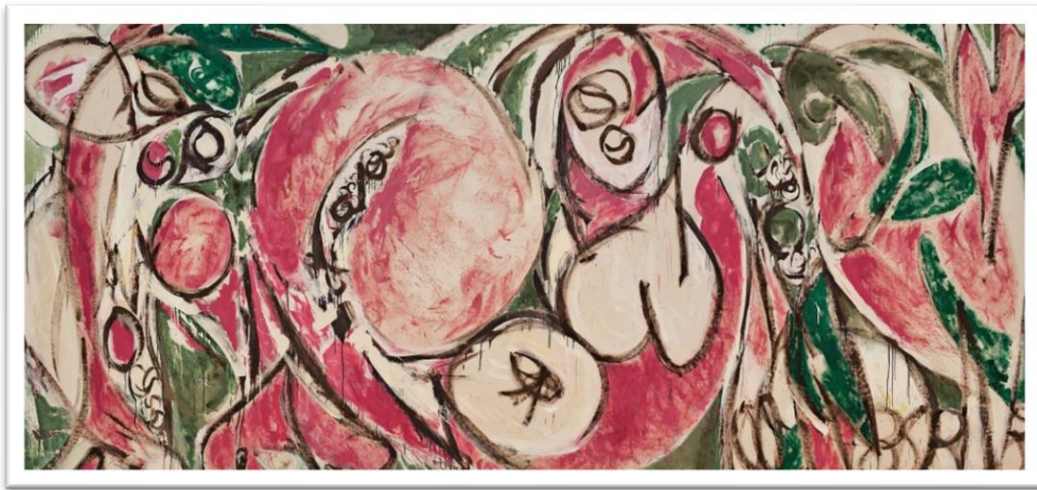


Fig 5 Lee Krasner: „Die Jahreszeiten“, 1957

paintings? Just as: *what are* the states of experience one would be immersed in, if one was to overcome these structures (and it is supposed that the painter might does this in the practice)? What happens to the world when it is detached from meaning and why might painting be one of the only ways to approximate this primordial sense of world? The following chapter will go over these problems in a twofold way: firstly, explicating the “norm” structure we are usually finding ourselves in consciously and then going over to what remains of this new freedom and the two states the painter might utilize.

3.4.1. The Narrative and the Stimmung

We have seen the intertwinement of perception, body and time already converged in the beginning of the thesis (See 2.1.1.) but also the one between us as embodied subjects, others, and language (See 2.2.1.). To understand the *narrative* structure as proposed from Louis Sass in his book “Madness and Modernism” more clearly, it will be useful to recap those intertwinements shortly for this purpose. One the one hand, it was acknowledged that there is a seeming continuity of our consciousness of our every-day experience, although we are by far not the most attentive Beings in this world, just due to the comparably limited abilities of our senses. There is yet some mechanism that fills the holes of our inattentiveness to make us move frictionless through our every-day life, so that we take this most significant background structure for our consciousness for granted. On the other hand, this structure is not something that comes to us by itself. It is something that we train through perceptual experience and learn through confrontation with others: the learning of setting intentions in the first place, directing

an experience of x to a thought of y, expressing it to a person z in communication. These are very regular and seemingly linear processes that shape this background structure for our consciousness, which give our lives – as our personal “arrested” time – a narrative when we intentionally reflect upon our experiences. But this personal time is a concept to us like anything else, a concept to help us navigate, an objectification of experiential aspects. And like any involuntarily breaking up of this structure (may this be a perceptual, emotional, or psychiatric rupture), the art of looking at the world *painterly* somewhat also resists this linear way of looking and therefore breaks with the narrative. The freedom of showing these new conflicting ways of expression and thought is something that came with a social change and code conversion of artistic freedom. As mentioned in the beginning, this is also the reason why it is most fruitful to associate the following ideas mostly with painting movements of the 20th century as they started to actively explore and challenge these background structures that we take for granted.

In a universe where human intentions are non-existent or inconsequential, and where objects no longer show up as goals, obstacles, or tools but as mere phenomena for contemplation, it is no longer possible for narrative structure, with its presumption of meaningful historical change, to serve as a central unifying principle. Many works of modernist literature therefore seek alternatives to storytelling and to all the standard device of temporal and narrative form.¹³¹

Sass also made the observation – and which is indeed the main claim of his book – that the uprising of psychology (for him most significant: the strong interest in Schizophrenia) does serve as a parallel for why the social encoding for art reception and production did change. (Indeed, also the emergence of photography made painting specifically lose its role of a mean to representation.) In all these transitions, Sass enlightens one momentum of experience that he emphasizes on as peculiarly interesting and enlightening for both, Schizophrenia and the new codes of modern arts (“arts” in Sass’ book is referring to all kinds of arts, but for the sake of this thesis is only relegating to painting), namely the Nietzsche-term *Stimmung*, “classifying” it somewhere on the verge between act and affliction.¹³² The thesis will use the term “Stimmung” (and later mood) to give a better understanding for the state painters find themselves in while looking and painting a world that seems detached from this narrative structure we are usually embedded in. It is a state that is both directed (act) but also penetrating (affliction). It is a state between alienation from the world from our stance as embodied subjects

¹³¹ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 17

¹³² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 51

and expression of this same world to us, our subjective embeddedness being nullified. There is a way in which our world *as our being* – made meaningful in the concert with other subjects –¹³³ crumbles and comes to light anew. And it is somewhat the crux of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of this “true thought” that is achieved in a state like this, that we will not find any “true essence” of things but *always* the perspectival thing, always the “possibility of other perspectives”¹³⁴. Exactly this lies in the core of the act of painting, to come closer to this multitude of perspectives.

Before leaning into these moods more profoundly, it might be interesting to look upon why Sass believes Schizophrenia would have something in common with this *Stimmung*, stating that its most distinct characteristics are a “[...] lack of cohesive theme or narrative line, of conventional space-time structure, of comprehensible causal relations, and of normal regulation of the symbol-referent relationship.”¹³⁵ Also, most interestingly there is an absence of this “narrative time” that we call our personal and which orders our perceptual consciousness. The impersonal time that has no chronology is experienced as-if directly, which also causes schizophrenic patients to emphasize on static aspects of the world, rather than dynamic or emotional aspects of the same.¹³⁶ Likewise in the act of painting, there is a sense of everything being experienced-at-once as “[...] temporality and spatiality are experienced as proliferating, intertwining, colliding and entering into prominence and receding from it in ever-varied ways.”¹³⁷ This again comes back to the all-encompassing “principle” of our body as the locus for this experience. We cannot move away from our bodily temporality and spatiality: it remains our true present and always hides behind our gaze – We cannot move away from it and display it before our gaze.¹³⁸ What we display is the “arrested”, personal time, our memories and our narrative that constitutes the subjectively meaningful background for our conscious experience. Nevertheless, there is more of possible experience that lies behind it, which is invisible, and which is unspeakable. We cannot easily escape the network of language that we find ourselves established in as concepts, but we *can* acknowledge that it is incomplete and therefore full of potentialities.¹³⁹

¹³³ Cf. Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 82

¹³⁴ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 92

¹³⁵ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 123

¹³⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 123

¹³⁷ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 36

¹³⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 85

¹³⁹ Cf. Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 183

As Merleau-Ponty acknowledged painting to be a voice for this silence that language cannot conquer, painting might be seen as the pictorial translation of these peculiarities of experience: the states that are speechless and the aspects of world that are transperceptual. Something that – again – lies in between the immanence of the embodied subject and its manifest world and that which is “[...] not-me that lies at the farthest reaches of the experiential universe.”¹⁴⁰ That, which illuminates myself as somehow non-linear and ambiguous. It will therefore be the interest of the next sections to shed some light on these moods and to contemplate where to locate and how to recover them.

3.4.2. Alienation

Before delving into the state of alienation descriptively, it might be useful to revisit Paul Crowther’s categories for transperceptual space (See 2.3.2.), that are the “invisible” qualities that nevertheless constitute our visibility. This is eliciting because shifting the focus in this specific way – and it is the realm of (in-)visibility that painters seek for – illuminates what mechanisms are at stake when “ordering” one’s perception so that we *do not* usually fall back in this state of estrangement from the world or alienation. Crowther’s first category for example “Spatial items, relations or states of affairs which [...] are incompletely unavailable or unavailable to visual perception”¹⁴¹ that include “[...] forms at the margins of immediate visual fields, small or microscopic structures of life forms, the visual aspects of the internal states of a body or state of affairs [...] and unusual perceptual perspectives”¹⁴² is already a proof for how selective our consciousness operates. We *could* have knowledge of all the things above if we “zoomed in/out” or concentrated, but usually we just do not do that. However, if we are in the situation to experience these things involuntarily, we can already have a glimpse of what it means to be in this state of alienation. For example, if we sit in an airplane and look upon the same city or country we usually know inside out, from above, we might first feel a little estranged from it, being so detached from all the usual structures and forms we knew it in. Nevertheless, if we continuously were to find ourselves on that airplane, it might not feel so strange after a while anymore. Maybe the prior example is a little far-fetched, as one could say that in this state of primordial inherence an airplane might not be the most intuitive form of experiencing something from an unusual perspective. A much more intuitive example for this feeling of estrangement might be the weird spatial “error” we make, when looking at something across the sea in a distance. This distance is not bodily understandable from the point of view

¹⁴⁰ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 54

¹⁴¹ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 38

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 38

we are standing at, so that we – most of the time – experience it as much closer than it really is, which strikes us with estrangement when we then try swimming towards it. Another very simple example that comes to mind is the very way something seemingly “alienates” itself from us when we stare at it for a longer time. Especially when we find particularities that we usually would not have been aware to. It is an impression of what – in its most excessive form – is called “Trema” by Louis Sass, as a first stage of delusion, with the only difference to delusional processes proper being that our consciousness usually will retrieve us into its “normal” structures quite quickly.

Unreality, where the world is devoid of feeling or authenticity; Mere Being, where the sheer fact of existence defies speech and understanding; Fragmentation, where details or parts overwhelm the synthetic whole: each of these phases or aspects of the *Trema* challenges the capacity of words and concepts to capture lived experience.¹⁴³



Fig. 6 Helen Frankenthaler: “Salome”, 1978

This is mentioned here, because this sense of experiencing the world as *Mere Being* is somewhat the strange state the painter also comes back to on a short notice to find this primordial inherence: the detachment of meaning and concepts that shape our lived world. It results in a flatness that Sass also sees in paintings by patients with Schizophrenia, that display a lack of both space and time.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, the concept of lack of time seems here more illuminating than ever, supposing that time is somewhat the ground-paradigm or concept that allows for further extensive concepts to happen. Just as Merleau-Ponty assumed the ambiguity of the body (and from that the world) originating in the ambiguity of time that was mentioned

¹⁴³ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 31-32

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 128

earlier. That it is (with Sass) described as *flatness* is also gripping, as it presupposes that fullness or depth of the world are a quite relevant presupposition for us to experience things as meaningful:

Painterly thinking, he [Merleau-Ponty] wrote, is ‘mute’, sometimes leaving us ‘with the impression of a vain swirl of significations, a paralyzed or miscarried utterance.’¹⁴⁵

In the prior quote we come back to Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on language and the way communication is always connected to the Other that in this “vain swirl of significations” appears absent for us, for which reason we experience it as mute: another aspect of the prior flatness.

Turning back to the question of *why* Merleau-Ponty gives vision a more primordial quality, he speaks of vision being “[...] the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside.”¹⁴⁶ This fission being at the core of having a body that is likewise exposed to the outside and reclusive to the inside. Vision being the unintended interrelation between the outside and the inside.

All that said, the painter certainly cultivates exactly this estrangement to analyse the realms that enable it. This thesis asserts that this state of alienation is something very inevitable when it comes to the trained body in the practice of painting. It is nevertheless the “decision” of the painter as an embodied subject how long one “stays” in that state. The first association to an art form from the 20th century might be Surrealism whose protagonists directly operated on this state of alienation and estrangement in the stance of a “willed passivity”¹⁴⁷. It is claimed regardless that – even just for a blink moment – all painters somehow get through this state of alienation as a part of the process of their engagement with the world. Because even *if* a painter develops a certain style, cultivates a *specific* way of seeing the transperceptual, there always is a beyond to this. There will not be a “once-and-for-all total meaning”¹⁴⁸. It was discussed how painting is in its essence a divergent activity for which practice might lead to mastery, but which outcome *never* is knowledge, because once a painter had acquired this knowledge, he could never produce a bad painting again (which of course is not the case).¹⁴⁹ The stadium of alienation therefore is an essential part of the practice. Without the wondering or the fascination about the same, one would most probably not go further to exploring any “beyond”. Cezanne –

¹⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting* p. 233

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 227

¹⁴⁷ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 42

¹⁴⁸ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 82

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 51

who was for Merleau-Ponty the gateway for his meaning-giving analysis on painting – was claimed by Merleau-Ponty to have a “schizoid temperament”¹⁵⁰. And that his work would display “a metaphysical meaning of his illness”¹⁵¹. There is a way in which for sure Cezanne’s paintings display this “[...] reduction of the world to the totality of frozen appearances [as in alienation] and the suspension of expressive values”,¹⁵² nevertheless it should not be insinuated with this that painters all would need to have a schizoid temperament to *be* painters. As it was examined, loads of painters and painterly schools most probably only rested in this state of alienation (as being a part of their practice) only for a very short time in their practice. It is therefore important to go over to the second important state of the Being of Painting, being that of *Expression*.



Fig. 7 Paul Cezanne: “Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen”, 1904-1906

3.4.3. Expression

Contrasting the impression of “mere being”, a second stage in this schizoid state is the way things develop a certain sense of “meaning”, without any particularity but just the “sheer sense of meaningfulness itself.”¹⁵³ This is interesting also for the practice of painting: the painter is yet an embodied subject at one particular point and embedded in their very specific interrelation

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *Cézanne’s Doubt*, p. 71

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 71

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 71

¹⁵³ Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 33

with the world around. This might in a first stance elicit the impression of a general meaningfulness, but in a second stance particularly in which way the world uncloses its invisibilities to this particular body. However, the “mere being”-aspect of the things experienced allows for this to happen first and foremost: as they no longer appear as tools or



Fig. 8 Maria Lassnig: “Krebsangst”, 1979

threats in a world of action, these things become objects for detached contemplation.¹⁵⁴

It was already discussed in chapter 3.2. how the way of looking pictorial has many different levels. The state of expression is therefore the most important genesis to explain the subjective emergence of world. In this state of expressive observation, it becomes apparent that the things themselves are no longer objects of a world external of oneself but rather sense data of the embodied, subjective standpoint from which the painter/observer is looking at them.¹⁵⁵ It is again: a glimpse of what could be called as the ontological but necessary constitutive connection between body, movement, and vision. Because as the observer “[...] stands back and observes, the more the objects of his awareness come to seem like reified external things that encompass all of existence”,¹⁵⁶ which is only the subjective painter’s existence and not an objectively detached external existence.

What this expressive state of observation of the painter shows us, is how the expression of things to the painter is not only a sign for our dialogical embeddedness within the world, but also a proof for our bodily subjective momentum. We *can* consciously conduct expression

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Sass: *Madness and Modernism*, p. 39

¹⁵⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 183

¹⁵⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 183

through our perceptive intentionality towards the outside. It shows the *possibility* of access to the things by the subject.

The beauty of the consequence of this expression is how the paintings themselves obviously appear as themselves expressive for the viewer (and for the painter) later. Again: the invisible/transperceptual qualities the painter experienced and expressed in a painting share the same openness with the viewer who then – in observation of the work – might or might not see these invisibilities. But it does not matter, whether the audience of a painting experiences the same expressive qualities of the work that the painter experienced. If this extensive state of expression is evoked in the viewer, the painter has already fulfilled their task. “There is a



Fig. 9 Joanna Gleich: *Ohne Titel*, 2012

freedom of imaginative empathy involved, and, in this freedom, it embodied an aesthetic character that expressive perception in normal interpersonal relationships lacks.”¹⁵⁷ Which also implies that in our every-day experience of interpersonal relationships, there is – however empathic the person might be – still a very rigid way of displaying this empathy. This – again – resulting from the mere fact that we have shared meaning and try to grasp these meanings to understand each other. The prominent saying of “A look is worth a thousand words” does not come from nowhere. Surely the ambiguity of the look, beside its freedom of expressive

¹⁵⁷ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 24

qualities, is indeed irritating and will not solve any objective problem. But interpersonal discourse often lacks an empathy that sometimes only *can* be elicited by the means of that, which is not-yet-visible or not-yet-speakable.

Likewise in painting, this reaction that one might have towards a painting – especially when not being ultimately familiar with painting in general – can be explained by the way its expressive qualities foreshadow the way we *would* like to lend our bodies towards an expressive freedom to the world that our “mind” (as being linguistically structured, constantly searching for the “order of things”) usually would not allow to. Just as the state of alienation, expression is an existential state that is experienced in the practice of painting and points back to our primordial human inherence. And just as Alienation, the expressive state is not something the painter remains continuously in. It somewhat follows “necessarily” after the stage of alienation but might also only remain for a blink second, while other painters might stay in it for their whole making of a work.

There are starts and stops, moments of insight and forgetting, transient thoughts that – in their transience – affect the painter without he or she being aware of it; strategies anticipated but subsequently not realized; anticipations that are realized; moments of struggle, disappointment and overcoming; hopes, fears, false victories, true ones, overriding depression, overriding joy, overriding feelings of nothing-in-particular and then, a finished painting.¹⁵⁸

3.5. Phenomenological Case Studies

For the last part of this thesis, the ideas developed before will collide with the worlds of thought of two painters who quite literally pursued the ideas by Merleau-Ponty in their practice of painting. It is therefore fruitful to look at them as a better understanding of what this manner of embodying perception makes to a painting body. It is not denied that this is a selection and that every selection takes a distinct focus of attention that might contort a wider picture, which is why it is therefore even more necessary to explain the selection. The depiction of the two Austrian artists Wolfgang Hollegha (*1929) and Markus Prachensky (*1932- † 2011) has mainly two, but on the wider scale, three reasons: firstly, it is the way that both developed ideas about painting and their practice that are closely aligned to what Merleau-Ponty, but also this thesis, claims to be ways of learning perception, seeing, and exploring nature anew. The second main reason is that both two were part of an Austrian group of artists, named “Gallerie St.

¹⁵⁸ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 23

Stephan” (English: “Gallery Saint Stephan”), that were especially important for the development of abstract art in Austria and also stood in a continuous dialogue with each other. Yet, their works differ immensely in style, although their basic projection on nature and painting was very similar. Which again makes the argument of different (in-)visibilities made explicit through the specific embodied but subjective stance of the painter newly valid, claiming that there is never a one-for-all knowledge about the transperceptual edges of our world. Depicting the two painters (Hollegha, Prachensky) from the total group of the four (Josef Mikl and Arnulf Rainer being the other two, both equally important for the developments of abstract art in Austria) also relates directly to the previous considerations on alienation and expression, being that Prachensky and Holleggha have affinities to these two stages. The third (not as evidently important) reason for choosing these two painters, is that this whole thesis obviously evolves from an Austrian perspective. Having the locus of perception on these topics from a somewhat national embeddedness, it seems intuitive not making too wide steps for understanding these life-worlds more approximately. Nevertheless, the promise of this thesis and the next chapter is to extend the look on these subject matters as to shape visibilities anew. That said, of course the applicability of these ideas should always only widen the scope and make the experience of painting and generally the visible world more manifold.

3.5.1. Abstraction and Figuration

Looking at the works by Prachensky and Holleggha, it is important to prefix why the looking at abstract paintings will be especially rewarding when considering the ideas of transperceptual space. In Merleau-Ponty’s own language, the painter has a special stance among other artists. As the writer or the philosopher would always be in a certain position of evaluating something (just by being embedded in the very descriptive system of language), the musician is operating at the other extreme, being so far away from the direct designatable that he would always only catch the outlines of Being.¹⁵⁹ “Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.”¹⁶⁰ This is obviously a very abbreviated description of art categories. However, the last sentence speaks to the way painting and the theory on painting has developed throughout the 20th century. Of course, painting did not always occupy this stance of being completely detached from any appraisal, as it had – in long periods of times – very strong social and political functions. Older art theoretical tools (as Iconography of Iconology) always categorized paintings in a connection to the Outside. The only real way of

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 228

¹⁶⁰ Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 228

understanding the social/political implications of painting in a historical context is to look upon the cultural frames that formed the gaze of the painter, prioritizing specific areas of visibility as well as eliminating others. In fact – looking at this with the mode of modern reception of artworks –

[...] the modern conception of painting as creative expression has been a novelty for the public much more than for the painters themselves, who have always practiced it, even if they did not construct the theory of it. That is why the works of the classical painter have a different meaning and perhaps more meaning than the painters themselves thought [...]¹⁶¹

But desisting from these historical facts, the practice itself, in its essential core, *always* had a structure that transcended an evaluating frame. As said in the previous quote, painting *always* has been a creative expression of the painter, even if it was not attributed this function by the public. Taking the goal of painting as essentially training the eye to look at a beyond that is transcending whatever strict objectifying systems of seeing the painter was embedded in, it must be recognizable that the essential structure of the practice of painting roots in the freedom of looking at everything and not being restricted by a specific system of accordance (as in language) to express *how* one sees it. And this is where abstract painting reflected an essential shift of perspective towards its practice, as it displayed a motif without any concrete withdrawal to an outer predetermined, figurative, or material visibility.¹⁶² However, this should not lead to the conclusion that abstract art forms do not obtain their motifs from nature or display aspects of nature in a not-yet-accustomed way. It is exactly this obstacle of not allowing the viewer to have a concrete representation in mind (although most of us still try to see something *in* abstract paintings, which is yet another proof how we always search for something objectively “valid”) that makes looking at abstract art even more interesting. It allows for the paintings of abstract art to be “[...] freed from the constraints of fixed and familiar notional viewing positions”¹⁶³ (which on the other side should not imply that painters of more figurative forms of art were not also displaying aspects of transperceptual space, they only did so in a “narrower” realm of visibility that was more graspable, like in perspective or geometrical forms). It was acclaimed continuously throughout this thesis, that Merleau-Ponty wants to find back to a visibility that is freed from objective constraints or the “scientific attitude”. The painter being in the position of finding back to this within his practice and portraying for his audience as an attempt to bringing seeing itself into sight.¹⁶⁴ Contrary to our ordinary vision, where relations as “in front of” or

¹⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and Voices of Silence*, p. 85

¹⁶² Cf. Schulz: *Ordnungen der Bilder*, p. 46

¹⁶³ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 39

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Stenger: *From Cézanne's Doubt to Ai Wei Wei*, p. 288

“behind” are usually recognized as unnoticed aspects of practical interests and contexts, abstract works can present these relations without any reference to such practical interests.¹⁶⁵ “By this means, it *directs attention to the spatial relations in their own right* as basic structural components in how things appear visually in transperceptual space.”¹⁶⁶ The beauty in this portrayal of aspects of transperceptual space is, that in lacking any directly visible relation to what Crowther calls “practical interests” (meaning our way of always wanting to grasp “concrete” things in perception), the virtual subject matter of the painting does allow for a multiplicity of possibilities. This means that the “intention” of the painter to display one aspect of transperceptual space does not necessarily imply that any viewer would see exactly this same aspect of it. Quite the contrary: in abstract art forms the virtual subject matter of the painting can deviate completely from the original motif of the painter in the viewers’ experience, which again suggests two things: the individuality of everyone’s subjectively embodied stance in their lifeworld and secondly, the never-ending multitude of suggestions of transperceptual space.

One last aspect concerning the experience of painting is brought up by Nigel Wentworth when he argues that also the term “figurative” is somewhat questionable, as we usually always see it as the contrasting concept to non-representation (abstraction). To take this into account, talking about transperceptual space, one must remember that telling something to have “figurative aspects of something else” can *also* imply things that are not merely visual in objectifiable ways. Oftentimes the reasons for certain “transperceptual” figurations have emotional or intellectual reasons that aren’t graspable in any other way than in a subjective “how it is for me”. Just the same counts for the painter; the figurative expression of certain aspects of the painter’s gaze is much more an act of *translation* of experience,¹⁶⁷ than an attempt for representing “true” data. And it is this, that also makes the beauty of painting: the painter is aware of the approximating character of their practice. If there was an absolute way of painting that could be reached at a specific level of perfection, the painter would stop painting very quickly. There just would not be any incentive once this level is reached. The style of the painter (as discussed in 3.3.3.) exists thereby in the same way her body does.¹⁶⁸ “[...] it is not an instrument, a mere vehicle but his very way of inhabiting and taking up the world, his way of presenting himself to others, and, in short, his existence.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 39

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 39

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Wentworth: *Phenomenology of Painting*, p. 104

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 193

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 193

Ending on this, we will therefore now turn to two specific ways of taking up the world and how they reflect the ideas developed in this thesis with Merleau-Ponty.

3.5.2. Markus Prachensky

The following shall be by no means thought of as an interpretation or analysis of the pictorial or painterly elements used by either Prachensky or Holleghe as every art theorist would be more capable to do this. One massive critique by Paul Crowther about Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology lies within the fact that "[...] his (Merleau-Ponty's) attention is confirmed almost exclusively to the painter's perception and equivalences, and the style-embodying product of gesture",¹⁷⁰ ignoring the fact that painting "[...] is an idiom of pictorial representation, or when abstract, *allusive* representation that works through optical illusion."¹⁷¹ However, it was argued in this thesis, specifically in the last section, that there is a way that figurations of our mind often have a "hidden" realm of emotional or intellectual character that lies within the "Invisible" or transeperceptual space. Opposing Crowther's critique from above, the thesis' argument claims that we first and foremost must understand the way the practice of painting is world *presenting* and not *re-presenting*, as the realms for our own representational

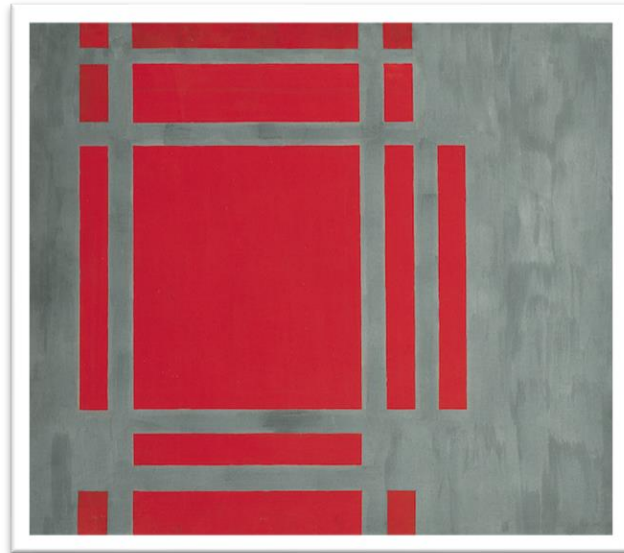


Fig. 10 Markus Prachensky: „Komposition Rot auf Grau“, 1954-55

understanding often lie in the realm of this, that is yet transeperceptual.

Starting off with Markus Prachensky's work, the thesis will pick out gestural elements that match or sympathize with the questions that were addressed in this thesis.

¹⁷⁰ Crowther: *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 100

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 100

3.5.2.1. Time

We have heard in the beginning of this thesis, that Merleau-Ponty explains the ambiguity of the body that brings forward the ambiguity of the world by seeing its origins in the ambiguity of time. The moment our intentional understanding of ourselves begins to manifest in a seeming narrative that is our “personal” time, time splits up in a memory of the past and an anticipation of the future and thereby is “arrested” (as Merleau-Ponty exclaims). Thereby the now – the atemporal present – is certainly the only vehicle that can make us turn back to understand that “impersonal” time always continuous to flow and that our conscious objectification of time is only a construction. Markus Prachensky certainly tried to live this present in his painterly gesture of experience. Just as with Hollegha, the painting act is something that comes through and through from a spontaneity that was trained by looking but in the moment must conform to



Fig. 11 Markus Prachensky: „Berlin“, 1963

this peculiar *sense* of the present.

Wolfgang Fleischer, who wrote a biography about Prachensky, tells the anecdote of him (Prachensky) participating in a kind of painterly “happening” that was exactly emphasizing this event-character of painting, leading him to destroy his canvas immediately afterwards as a gesture of highlighting his point.¹⁷² Obviously this was a special occasion and Prachensky

¹⁷² Cf. Fleischer, Wolfgang: *Markus Prachensky*. 1st Edition. Wien: Löcker Verlag 1990, p. 17

usually did not destroy his paintings, still the event-like character remains in his paintings visible in certainly a multitude of ways, manifesting movements of a particular moment just as visible traces of the time of its creation.¹⁷³



Fig. 12 Markus Prachensky: „S. Angelo Duke – A Size“, 1977

3.5.2.2. Simultaneity of Being

Another characteristic that often seems to be expressed in Prachensky's practice is the way all transperceptual qualities of things in perception are indeed present all the time. The invisibility of them frames our perception and Prachensky certainly developed a way of making them visible for himself:

Es gälte also nicht nur ein Objekt darzustellen, sondern alle wechselwirkenden Beziehungen dazu, Stimmungen und Erwartung, das Wissen, die Hypothesen und Konzepte, die damit verbunden werden können, die Liebe dazu und die Angst dabei – es gälte kurzum der Wahrheit viel mehr ehre zu geben und in einem Prozeß dynamischer

¹⁷³ Cf. Fleischer: *Markus Prachensky*, p. 17

Interaktionen einzutreten, dessen Ende kaum abzusehen ist. (Statt einer anämischen Subjekt-Objekt-Trennung auf sich beruhen zu lassen, malend oder nicht.)¹⁷⁴

Another thing to be reminded here is how keen Merleau-Ponty was on the ideas developed by Gestalt-theorists. Especially the idea that an experience of anything is much more than its singularities, even if you could perfectly separate them all from one another objectively. And that this simultaneity is especially apparent in vision, where we can literally “touch” the sun and the stars and likewise imagine ourselves and other beings elsewhere.¹⁷⁵ “Vision alone teaches us that beings that are different, exterior’, foreign to one another, are yet absolutely together, are simultaneity.”¹⁷⁶ An interesting example that is given in Prachensky’s biography is the way we experience melodies. The experience of a melody in music is an immediate “Gestalt”, the experience would be impossible if we would hear the sounds separately from each other and then – from the memory of the just-heard – had to assemble them.¹⁷⁷ The same



Fig. 13 Markus Prachensky: “Maremma”, 1985

¹⁷⁴ Fleischer: *Markus Prachensky*, p. 37 - English Translation: “It is not only about portraying an object, but all its reciprocal relations, moods and expectations, knowledge, hypotheses and concepts, that could be connected to it, love and fear about it – it counts in short, to give truth much more honouring and to enter into a process of dynamic interactions, from which the end is not foreseeable. (Instead of lingering in an anaemic subject-object-distinction, painting or not.)”

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, p. 146

¹⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, p. 146

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Fleischer: *Markus Prachensky*, p. 35

immediate presence of things in perception is likewise important for the seeing-practice of Prachensky and the way certain things are more present than others.

The interesting reverse conclusion is here – again much in alliance with Merleau-Ponty – that we do not put things in a personal and individual order afterwards, but that our seeing is shaped by our being-in-the-world with our respective bodies in the first place: it is our integral perspective that firstly establishes what we see and at the same time determines *how* we see it.¹⁷⁸ As a side note: this does not contradict the fact that painters often paint from their memories, which Prachensky, just as one example, often did. It is only about the first immediate impression of the things in perception, the memory is a secondary stance that yet originates in that first bodily impression.

3.5.2.3. Alienation

In the last chapter (3.4.), it was already mentioned that the embodied practice of seeing and painting – learning to unlearn the regularities and objectification we have accumulated – leads to a certain state of alienation. This state of alienation in perception is something that this thesis



Fig. 14 Markus Prachensky: „Bilella“, 1994

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Fleischer: *Markus Prachensky*, p. 35

claims to be a necessary step of experience when one tries to understand the ambiguities inherent to one's world and one's body. However, it was also stated that this stadium often unfolds very subtle and most probably in a flux-state the painter is immersed in. It is nevertheless somewhat recognizable how close certain painters approximated this state of alienation in their expression of it. It is very interesting – especially looking at this over the course of a life's work – how Prachensky seemingly came closer and closer to this very stadium. Yet, the simultaneity is still visible: everything collides in these later works that appear to have something very alienating in their characteristic. It feels as if elements and forms came closer and likewise more separated. An ambiguity portrayed due to a life-long training.

Prachensky states himself that “Zuletzt sieht man so, wie man malt. Die Bilder sind stärker, sie schlucken fast die Landschaft.”¹⁷⁹ What is interesting about this comment, is the way it reveals a somewhat symbiotic character of experiencing what is visible (and in which way) and the existential Being these perspectives and experiences have for the painter. Which again might hit us with a strange feeling of sympathy, as we have somewhat unlearned this primordial way of seeing. A seeing that connects us directly to “how the world is for us”, unlike an objectified knowledge of the world.

This beautifully underlines the premise Merleau-Ponty was after. The eye can be trained in a way of seeing and thereby learns a certain way of experiencing the transperceptual qualities that frame the visible. And it also is a continuous process, which can most beautifully be



Fig. 15 Markus Prachensky: „Cinque Terre“, 2003

¹⁷⁹ Fleischer: Markus Prachensky, p. 45 - English Translation: “In the end, one sees like one paints. The pictures are stronger, they nearly swallow the landscape.”

recognized when looking at the progression one painter makes along his lifetime. And it nearly misleads to use the term “progression” here, as it has nothing to do with a “better” or “bigger” but a more networked, a more interconnected way of seeing.

Ein Bild ist ein eigener Lebensraum mit Gesetzen und Grenzen, hier muß sich alles einordnen, was aus einer intimen Kenntnis der Landschaft zu einer unentwirrbaren Verflechtung im Bewußtsein wurde. Und das Spritzen und Fließen gehört dann zu nichts als der Bildvorstellung.¹⁸⁰

3.5.3. Wolfgang Holleggha

What is extremely interesting putting Wolfgang Holleggha into dialogue with Prachensky is the way his work’s progress nearly happens to have a backwards orientated tendency. Beginning with a seeming alienation from forms and spaces, the exalting expression of his painterly gesture seems particularly dominant in his later work. An overall attribution of his own necessity for painting lies exactly in the way Merleau-Ponty did articulate the importance of understanding man’s primordial inherence: the way our subjective embodied stance in the world is the ontological ground for our world-experience through our particular perspective on it. And that painting is an attempt to express this ontological nature of experience, and not a creating of pictures of an exterior world. Thereby for Holleggha, the nature is inside as the realization of nature not being something detectable on the outside but something that comes forward through

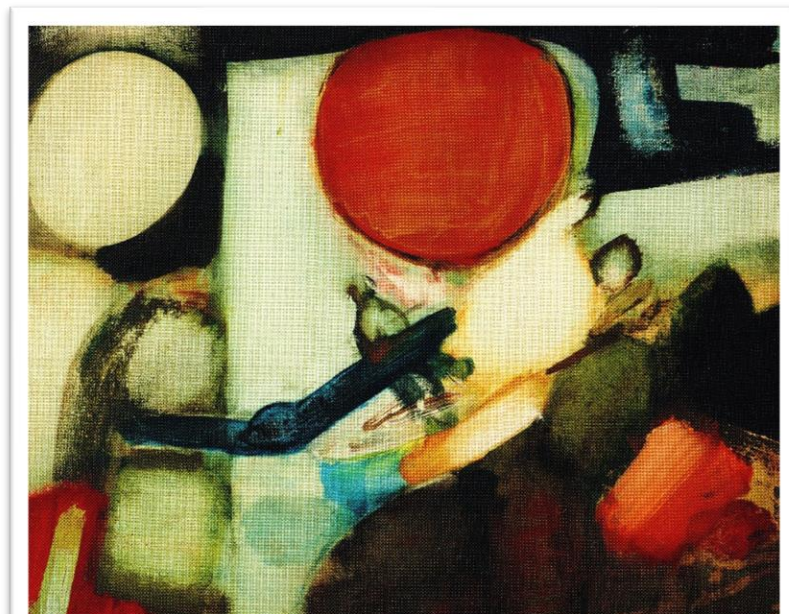


Fig. 16 Wolfgang Holleggha: „Komposition mit zwei Kreisen II“, 1955

¹⁸⁰ Fleischer: Markus Prachensky, p. 45. - English Translation: „A painting is a habitat by itself with its own laws and borders, here everything must arrange in order, what transformed from an intimate knowledge of the landscape to an inextricable entanglement of consciousness. And the splashing and flowing then belongs to nothing else than the image presentation.”

our specific Being in the world. He states himself that this is exactly why his doing abstraction: “Ich will nicht von der Natur weg, sondern mit Hilfe der modernen Abstraktion zur Natur hin.”¹⁸¹

3.5.3.1. Perspectivism

In Hollegha's attempt of coming closer to express this constitutive connection between ourselves and the world, he firstly very much accepted and lived the perspectivism of things in perception. Which also for Merleau-Ponty was somewhat the only way of truly living phenomenology. Thereby both in Hollegha's practice as in phenomenological thinking, “[...] perceptual experience – mere experience, if you like – acquires world-presenting content” and that “[...] we inhabit the world as a domain of activity.”¹⁸² It is thereby helpful to understand the term “motif” as the way that the static one-sided thing becomes a perspectival thing with all its possible variants in the perception of the painter. And this perspectivism of Hollegha is something embedded already in the choosing of an object:

Farbe, Formenvielfalt, die Bewegung, die das Ding anzeigen, lassen ihn aufmerksam werden und er nimmt das Holzstück mit in sein Atelier, legt es auf ein Fensterbrett und

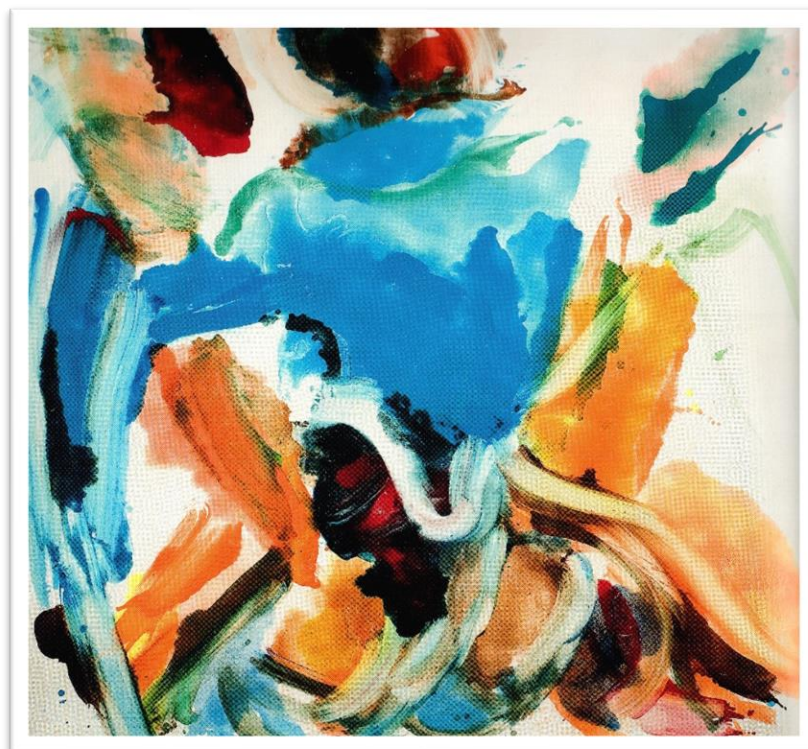


Fig. 17 Wolfgang Hollegha: „Schachteltier“, 1970

¹⁸¹ Hollegha in Holler-Schuster, Günther: “Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha”: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 9 - English Translation: „I do not want to go away from nature, rather I want to come closer to nature with the tools of modern abstraction.”

¹⁸² Noë: *Action in Perception*, p. 179

begegnet ihm fortan täglich unter verschiedensten Bedingungen. Licht, Temperatur, Staub, andere dazugelegte Gegenstände, seine emotionale Befindlichkeit, all das mag ihn zu einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt dazu animieren, sich wieder und näher mit dem plötzlich zum „Motiv“ werdenden Ding zu beschäftigen.¹⁸³

Thereby Holleggha is also embracing the fact that this perspectivism from the stance of an individual embodied subject also includes a certain selection from the eye. The eye is usually not confronted with stiff motifs, with elevations and view attractions, much more it (the eye) relates to flexible matter and to that, which is always changing.¹⁸⁴

3.5.3.2. Body and Movement

And much in accordance with Merleau-Ponty, also Holleggha thereby respects the constitutive connection between Body, Movement and Vision as the elementary triad for exploring the world in its perspectivism. Stemming from the simple fact that the eye itself is a moving organ, - observing therefore being an act of directing the gaze -¹⁸⁵ Holleggha very much experiences

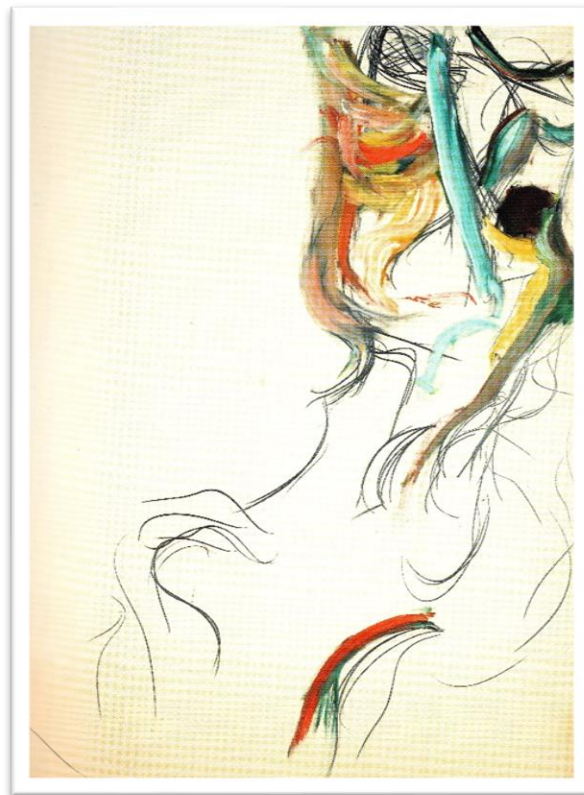


Fig. 18 Wolfgang Holleggha: „Holzstück“, 1973

¹⁸³ Holler-Schuster: *Die Natur ist innen*, p. 6 - English Translation: “Colour, variety of shapes, movement that the thing demonstrates, let him become aware and he [Holleggha] takes the piece of wood back to his studio, puts it on his ledge and faces it under different conditions. Light, temperature, dust, other assembling objects, his emotional state, all of this might motivate him at a certain point to engage with the thing again and closer that now transformed into a motif.”

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Holler-Schuster: *Die Natur ist innen.*, p. 9

¹⁸⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8

painting as a bodily practice, going around the motifs, sort of *living* the transperceptual qualities that make the motif become visible with his whole body. Just in the way Merleau-Ponty described Cézanne, it can also be said with Hollegha that he fully wants to *give into* the illusions that we have when we move our heads that objects themselves appear as moving, if our judgment did not set these appearances straight.¹⁸⁶ And it is felt in the way movements become touchable and how tensions that always are present in our perception become tangible, as they are made explicit in this manner of painting.

Der Korb, die Puppe, der Fetzen, der Ast, das Holzstück, sie alle treten in Erscheinung als ‚Konstellation von Licht und Farbe, von Spannungsverhältnissen, die er [Hollegha] anhand von Gegenständen erlebt und durch ein abstrahierendes Sehen und Gestalten in Malerei umsetzt.¹⁸⁷

What is very well formulated in the last paragraph is the way the author is using the term “abstracting” somewhat as a bodily function, a variant of seeing and in a sense a mode of perceiving the world around oneself.

3.5.3.3. Spontaneity and Expression

The final comment made of Hollegha’s inherently bodily practice of painting is the way he prepares for his painting. We have heard in chapter 3.3. how painting is a habitual practice, a



Fig. 19 Wolfgang Hollegha: „Kinderkopf“, 1960

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Cézanne’s Doubt*, p. 63

¹⁸⁷ Holler-Schuster: *Die Natur ist innen*, p. 9 - English Translation: “The basket, the doll, the shred, the piece of wood, all of them make an appearance as a ‘constellation of light and colour, of relations of tension, that he [Hollegha] experiences on the basis of things and that he translates into painting though his abstracting looking and shaping.”

divergent activity and always somewhere in the middle of a reflex and a pre-mediated action. In the spontaneity that Hollegha performs in his practice, all of these aspects come to light very explicitly. The movements, most visible in all of Hollegha's paintings can be traced back to the



Fig. 20 Wolfgang Hollegha: „Blaue Mütze“, 2004

very way he (up until this day) pursues his practice: he *draws* to incorporate the thing he wants to paint,¹⁸⁸ thereby understanding the incorporating aspect quite literally. As – after a long period of looking at the motif repeatedly – the making of the actual painting or drawing usually happens in less than one day as a spontaneous gesture. Obviously: a considerate gesture that took a lot of “pre-meditation” but is then so inherently incorporated into the movements of his body, that the actual “expressing” phase in the painting only takes a very short time. Which is even more impressive as most of Hollegha's paintings and drawings have immense measures, his studio having a ceiling height of 15 meters.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Holler-Schuster: *Die Natur ist innen*, p. 8

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Fleck, Robert: „Holleghas Abstrakter Expressionismus“: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 15

Thereby the characteristic style that is now known for Hollegha for decades has a felt element of this spontaneous expression. This expression being the way Hollegha is looking at the objects



Fig. 21 Wolfgang Hollegha: „Lungau“, 2013
(Vorstudie)



Fig. 22 Wolfgang Hollegha: „Lungau“, 2015

in an abstracting manner but also the reverse: how the things express themselves and stick out to the painter: an oscillating kind of agency in this dialogue of visibility, embedded in a bodily practice of seeing, drawing, and painting.

3.6. Conclusion: How to See the World Differently Now?

What will change now that one has gained this knowledge? In common understandings of how to process works of art or the experience of them, it shines through that the more scientific and nowadays technologized our world becomes, the more we perceive art-experience as an escapade. But is it not striking that we must escape from a world that apparently holds one so tightly with its objectifying mechanisms, that one really searches to escape into a detached transcendence? The prior thesis wanted to show firstly how the conditions for this experience of transcendence are much more immanent that one would assume and that in the bodily practice of painting, this primordial relationship between our bodies and the world is somewhat restored.

Another accompanying aspect is the acceptance of ambiguity which lies at the heart of the human condition, something that we usually try to overcome with the concrete identification of the things in the world beginning with ourselves. It should not seem as if the practical world we live is corrupted by the means of this thesis. But it shall be argued that we lose a certain sense of critical ability if we completely give into the mechanisms that seek to put the world into categories in an attempt to make processes more efficient. In this light the prior thesis could likewise be a social criticism of how painterly thinking or artistic thinking in general is constantly pushed into a background of irrelevance and its findings disregarded as not being “real” knowledge. Regarded in this perspective, the thesis wanted to give back the relevancy of this kind of thinking as not only world presenting but also world *forming*, being a critical tool for showing what is not-yet-visible and questioning our taken-for-granted perspectives. With the usage of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s findings on perception, the thesis put its focus on the concept of visibility which for Merleau-Ponty was *the* primordial tool for “receiving” the world. It nevertheless could be argued with modified versions of Paul Crowther’s argument for transperceptual space that the same primordial inherence could also be elicited in experiences of music or literature (or any other possible artform).

Nevertheless, the very way painting claims the specific stance of being so intuitively graspable without needing to know any pre-established concepts, it somehow has the means to defend its very special position Merleau-Ponty argued for. In the realm of painting, it was therefore described in the thesis, how the three main world-constituting factors with Merleau-Ponty – being the subjective embodiment, otherness, and the world of outside-things – become newly graspable in practice.

In the most significant way, the prior thesis therefore wanted to exemplify painting as a bodily practice according to its world-presenting parameters and therefore break it down phenomenologically. The reality of the painter was thereby shown not as being a state of detached transcendence but of significant immanence that is learned and internalized in a bodily practice. And learning to “see” the world in this sense differently can give us back the tools of understanding our own bodily embeddedness better which further leads to us being more open to change and less determined by the concepts we developed socially or scientifically. m

Our bodily knowledge, what is nowadays often called “intuition”, is something we usually do not take as particularly trustworthy, yet we often appoint to it a certain relevance that we find non-scientific. The dualistic attitude of separating body and “ratio” that mostly still lingers in the background of our being thereby eliminates an endless number of possible experiences that would give us back the perspectivism Merleau-Ponty claimed for. The more perspectives

we have of the world, the more we accumulate knowledge and understanding of that, which is not us and which is other, the less we try to cast aspects aside, that we do not immediately comprehend. In this sense the phenomenological approach is a questioning of why we lost the ability to ask ourselves “How is it *for me*?” and why it is that we constantly try putting experiences into clusters. The free and intuitive reaction to a painting (or any kind of artistic expression) poses a direct resonance to this, which is at the core of our being, namely that connection between body and world that literally puts the experience before our eyes. Most of us just need to lean into the ambiguity of being anew and relearn to see *otherwise*. It is exactly in the things, that we usually take for granted, where the true “magic” happens.

The effective, present, ultimate and primary being, the thing itself ... offer themselves therefore only to someone who wishes not to have them but to see them, not to hold them as with forceps, or to immobilise them as under the objective of a microscope, but to let them be and to witness their continued being – to someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask for in return the resonance they require, who follows their own movement.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty in Andrews: *Question of Painting*, p. 261

4. Picture Credits

Fig. 1: Modersohn-Becker, Paula: „Selbstbildnis mit gespreizten Händen“ 1897 <https://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/bremen-kultur/artikel,-ausstellung-mit-selbstbildnissen-paula-modersohnbeckers-aid,1859811.html> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 2: Münter, Gabriele: Moor im Herbst (Berglandschaft mit Nebelstreif)“, 1944 <https://www.kettererkunst.de/kunst/kd/details.php?obnr=119001820&anummer=496&detail=1> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 3: Delaunay, Sonia: „Flamencosängerinnen (Großer Flamenco)“, 1915/16 <https://artinwords.de/sonia-delaunay-malerei-design-und-mode/> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 4: Gontscharowa, Natalja Sergejewna: „Espagnole“, 1918-1920 <https://www.lempertz.com/de/kataloge/kuenstlerverzeichnis/detail/gontscharowa-natalja-sergejewna.html> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 5: Krasner, Lee: „Die Jahreszeiten“, 1957 <https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/artworks-artists/artworks/the-seasons> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 6: Frankenthaler, Helen: „Salome“, 1978 <https://www.mumok.at/de/salome> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 7: Cezanne, Paul: „Mont Sainte-Victoire-Seen“, 1904-1906 https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/die-natur-hab-ich-kopieren-wollen-es-gelang-mir-nicht.932.de.html?dram:article_id=129502 Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 8: Lassnig, Maria: „Krebsangst“, 1979 <https://www.albertina.at/ausstellungen/maria-lassnig/> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 9: Gleich, Joanna: Ohne Titel, 2012 <https://www.dorotheum.com/de/l/1079305/> Letzter Zugriff am 16.04.2021

Fig. 10: Prachensky, Markus: „Komposition Rot auf Grau“, 1954-1955 <https://www.prachensky.net/portfolio-item/1950-1959/> Letzter Zugriff am 05.03.2021

Fig. 11: Prachensky, Markus: „Berlin“, 1963 <https://www.prachensky.net/portfolio-item/1960-1969/> Letzter Zugriff am 05.03.2021

Fig. 12: Prachensky, Markus: „S. Angelo Duke – A Size“, 1977 <https://www.prachensky.net/portfolio-item/1970-1979/> Letzter Zugriff am 06.03.2021

Fig. 13: Prachensky, Markus: „Maremma“, 1985 <https://www.prachensky.net/portfolio-item/1980-1989/> Letzter Zugriff am 06.03.2021

Fig. 14: Prachensky, Markus: „Billela“, 1994 <https://www.prachensky.net/portfolio-item/1990-1999/> Letzter Zugriff am 06.03.2021

Fig. 15: Prachensky, Markus: „Cinque Terre“, 2003 <https://www.prachensky.net/portfolio-item/2000-2009/> Letzter Zugriff am 06.03.2021

Fig. 16: Hollegha, Wolfgang: „Komposition mit zwei Kreisen II“, 1955: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 59

Fig. 17: Hollegha, Wolfgang: „Schachteltier“, 1970: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 78

Fig. 18: Hollegha, Wolfgang: „Holzstück“, 1973: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 83

Fig. 19: Hollegha, Wolfgang: „Kinderkopf“, 1960: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 67

Fig. 20: Hollegha, Wolfgang: „Blaue Mütze“, 2004: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 100:

Fig. 21: Hollegha, Wolfgang: "Lungau", 2013: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 107

Fig. 22: Hollegha, Wolfgang: "Lungau", 2015: In: Holler-Schuster, Günther: *Die Natur ist innen. Der Maler Wolfgang Hollegha*. 1st Edition. Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum 2016, p. 109

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