

The Extended Body and the Aesthetics of Merleau-Ponty

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ABSTRACT

An extended “restless” body was the center of perceptual and ontological importance for Merleau-Ponty — a source of insight into how persons navigate and understand the world. But he was sufficiently aware as well of the roles an *extended* body played in art. This paper considers two stages in Merleau-Ponty’s work, roughly corresponding to his early and late writings, where the boundary between body and world can be flexible and complex but where the body’s extension is artistically significant. After Fred Rush’s coinage of “prosthetic effect,” I utilize prosthesis metaphorically to illustrate the use of an extended body in the production and reception of art when the world demands an immediate response and the imposition of engagement and where the potential for aesthetic *identification* has greater explanatory power as a unit than as a body separate from that environment. The second use deals with Merleau-Ponty’s more difficult notions of flesh and chiasm to consider an intersecting world unfolding itself — reversing the direction of the usual dialogue between artist and a solliciting world, as Merleau-Ponty sees it. In the course of doing so, this essay includes a discussion of Paul Klee’s painting, *The Ventriloquist in the Moors*, Descartes on phantom limb pains and artistic identity. While technology has fostered digital devices, which appear as prostheses and form significant aspects of our culture, Merleau-Ponty had imagined our extended bodies in more ubiquitous and quotidian ways.

KEYWORDS

Merleau-Ponty
Prosthetic
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Descartes



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Maurice Merleau-Ponty was sufficiently astute in recognizing that an extended view of the human body had significant consequences for the understanding of production, reception, and experience in art. In this paper I use the metaphor of a prosthesis to illuminate aspects of an extended human body, which in certain contexts is at one with the person extended, and hope to show that what others have called a prosthetic effect has explanatory power when it comes to artists and the auditors of their work. The use of a prosthetic metaphor is primarily about *identification* and in this paper artistic identification, where thinking of a unit is more useful (and a stronger claim) than thinking about elements that are separate and individual.

This paper is organized into four sections. The first indicates the use of the prosthetic metaphor from a phenomenological point of view and notes how Merleau-Ponty understands the extended body, not simply as a way of navigating the world but also how it functions in an aesthetic domain. The second section turns to Paul Klee's painting, *The Ventriloquist in the Moors*, where I see the ventriloquist tied to his dummy as an apt example of a prosthetic effect and the moors an excellent case of the world folding back upon the body. The third section introduces a Cartesian point of view, to which Merleau-Ponty was opposed, utilizing the ventriloquial analogy to help dismiss Descartes' views of animals as automata and persons as ontologically dual. And lastly, I move the prosthetic discussion to the artistic identity of the artist as I suggest Merleau-Ponty understands it.

The Prosthetic and Merleau-Ponty

In my use of the term ‘prosthesis’ I hope to distinguish two kinds that are relevant to Merleau-Ponty’s various views on art and the artist. There is, for Merleau-Ponty, a practical perceptual immediacy for which the prosthetic metaphor is important. However, there is also the more general, universal ontology where the concepts of flesh and chiasm, as utilized for example in the posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible*, stretch the body’s intimacy with the world forming an intimate binary — a situated body and a complex, intersecting world that folds back upon it.

When the body is up against situations where responsibility, potentiality, and action appear to be demanded, the aforementioned prosthetic metaphor expresses the body’s extended domain. But here the claim is stronger than, say, the affordances given in an environment, but rather the prosthetic is a point of view where what we might otherwise think of as independent entities is thought of as one. That idea brings to the fore the incarnation, the melding and contact, of the animate and the inanimate. But with respect to his general ontology, which Merleau-Ponty has called an astronomical sense of the world, is his notion of a chiasm, an intertwining, interconnected universe — akin to Leibniz’s pre-established harmony. It is a perspective of a world internality related.

Well into the background of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is the belief that the sciences, for all their astounding prosperity and achievement, are about dead things, or rather the reductionist physicalism of science excludes as basic ontology the recognition of the lively activity of objects of perception. Even in the cosmological analysis of pre-Socratic Greece, with the ancient elements, earth, air, fire, and water, a chance was missed for something live being elemental. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty uses the general term ‘flesh’ as something he refers to as elemental. Suppose we leave that as background and return to it later on, less as a full ontological account but rather as it relates to Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics.

Writing about the phenomenology of architecture, Fred Rush explains Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a body already embedded in the world, an extended living body not separated from a world perceived, in terms of a prosthesis. In introducing his analysis of Steven Holl’s 2004 modernist Bloch

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Addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, itself an extension, he says, “Merleau-Ponty stresses that objects and spaces appear to me almost as bodily — i.e., as continuous of my own bodily movements and aims.”¹ He says, “There are times when the prosthetic effect is extremely strong — e.g., a musician’s experience of her favorite instrument as indissolubly part of her.”² For Merleau-Ponty, an experience like playing the violin or typing is a pre-conscious activity closely linked with habit, sometimes a *haptic* experience as when touching comes together with other senses, all or some merging. At times, as Rush says, the effect may be strong but may vary in degrees of embodiment and unity. Here, Rush is emphasizing that perceiving the world may be a matter of the predominance of one bodily aspect over another, arms rather than legs as with the violin, or may involve the body as a whole, which surely is not always the case. So then, the prosthetic effect need not be an experience of tactile physical contact, but rather the perceptual field need only be an extension of my body as far as the “projection of my aims regarding that space and objects.”³ So, according to Rush, the prosthetic extension of our bodies includes what may lie ahead of us as part of our perceptual moment — the objects in the space at which I aim to traverse but have not yet arrived, as with the Bloch Addition leading the visitor architecturally. Later on I will make reference to the artist’s identity, which is less physical, more ethereal, but with inescapable consequences stemming from a prosthetic or prosthetic-like effect but susceptible to change as we shall see.

When we think about prosthetics in this general sense of an extended body, additional examples from everyday life are not hard to find: the third baseman’s mitt on his hand but also the space considered the defensive domain of that position, the fork in the hand of the diner but also the plate on the table are examples (the ‘I can’ of the fielder or diner), which after a time being unthinking or natural extensions of ourselves for purposes of expanding our status and/or powers, without which the doing of what we intend would not be a possible circumstance or at best would not be possible to do well. Prosthetic effects are oriented toward a future and are expressed under conditions of intention and responsibility. Here of course I am widening the application (but not the general meaning of *prosthesis*) to stretch well beyond its work in the anatomical reconstruction of missing limbs. This general sense of prosthesis implies an integration of a body with something otherwise thought to be external to it. In this more general sense, there are links between self and world where the world’s objects are

unthinkingly perceived as part of our selves, and the distinction between acting with them and being without them, that is, as external objects or parts of our bodies — this ambiguity — is simply irrelevant. Those times, those conditions, I am thinking of as prosthetic occurrences, their effects and experiences.

Consider these remarks by Merleau-Ponty:

A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which may break it off. She feels where the feather is, just as we feel where our hand is. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can 'get through' without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against my body. ... The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects rather than the position of objects through it.⁴

One consequence of the bodily prosthetic is that the boundaries of selves can change. The woman with the hat would not always be wearing it, and the man in the car need not be condemned to a life of driving. The point here is that identities of selves, how and where they move, their domain of responsibility and power, their limits and opportunities may be strong but temporary, even fleeting, may change on a dime and in many cases with corresponding changes in an identity of the person involved. In the case of the driver or the third baseman, traces or vestiges of those identities may subsist when no longer in their former prosthetic circumstance, like driving or playing baseball, so that we *may* recognize and identify each as driver or baseball player when not driving or playing ball. The trace of celebrity is particularly obvious, being most apparent with in-person appearances of movie and television stars, their work carried with them to other contexts. However, a prosthetic vestige can be the subject of social controversy as with the players of video games when they are away from their gorgeous display screens and dramatic fictional narratives.

The idea that a prosthetic effect can have serious moral consequences has a great deal to do with these traces and has come to the fore in issues regarding video games. If I play at killing men or abusing women, where the mechanisms of virtual reality are prostheses in my control, very much like musical instruments, will my attitudes or behavior

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continue in subtle ways when the game is over? I am after all empowered in situations that I have entered and effected in ways that are unlike movies or novels, where my involvement logically prevents me from entering the action. Such games, enhanced by a new realism perfected by technology, are particularly poignant cases of taking art personally. Or, we might note that the cultural consequences of our attachments to mobile devices have not yet been sorted out.

Garry Hagberg has suggested that when it comes to the mind/body problem, we should use the term 'body' only with respect to corpses.⁵ However, when Merleau-Ponty uses the term "body image," what he implies by 'body' is a certain dynamic. By "dynamic" he says, "this term means that my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task." And by spatiality he means a spatiality of situation to contrast it with simply a position in space like the fielding situation of the third baseman or the musical session of the violinist. Our body always takes location with it, and location is oriented in a site-specific context. As Deleuze and Guattari quip, "never is the pasture separated from the cows that populate it."⁶ However, the idea of context here includes possibilities and change and with it a future which may be unpredicted and intermingled with an unlimited array of forthcoming events and objects. The location of the body for Merleau-Ponty is a place of "unrest," and the interaction between the perceiver and the perceived takes the form of interrogation or questioning, a dialogue that is a general condition of philosophy itself, with the world responding.

Commonplace in the creative process as well as in the experience of the spectator is a prosthetic element when photographer and camera are at work or painter with oils and brush. The dancing surface is prosthetic; the performance floor and performance space are considered extensions of the dancers. The dancing surface may be stepped or sloped as well as flat, ice or like ice or puddled water as in the case of Gene Kelly in the rain, or a surface broken in a swimming pool in a Busby Berkeley performance. Or, the microphone's impact on singers and songs and then its miniaturization for singing and dancing transformed entertainment. In each case, an appreciation of the artistic event would be incomplete without taking into account the prosthetic effect and its at-oneness with the artist and performer. No doubt, we often do this without the need to articulate its

status, and it is always possible to see the prosthesis as an independent element.

Paul Klee and Ventriloquism

As art expresses or exposes the meaning of a culture, it extends it in new and imaginative ways. So, it is not surprising that throughout the work of Merleau-Ponty the arts play a central role. After Cézanne, Matisse, and Leonardo, Paul Klee is the painter he discusses most frequently. Galen Johnson reminds us that Klee's "The Thinking Mind" was influential in Merleau-Ponty's own "Eye/Mind" and that "it was in the reflections of Paul Klee on the art of painting that Merleau-Ponty found some of the most germinating insights" for that writing.⁷ He attributes to Klee's work an emphasis on the line, which he says is "an adventure, a history, a meaning of the line" and "a blueprint of a genesis of things" as it "renders the visible." Klee's paintings, *The Vocal Fabric of Singer Rosa Silber* and *Battle Scene from the Comic Operatic Fantasy "The Seafarer,"* deal with popular vocal performance, hence examining vocality through the visible as with his 1923 painting *The Ventriloquist in the Moors*.

Paul Klee's *The Ventriloquist in the Moors* can be read as an exemplar of many aspects of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Klee worked on this painting while at the Bauhaus, where he had built his son Felix a puppet theatre for Punch and Judy shows and over the years had produced more than 500 works whose titles related to theatre, masks, music, and puppets. There is an obvious connection in Klee's painting with *der Bauchredner*, the German word for ventriloquist, literally belly or stomach speaker, and what appears as the ventriloquist's motionless lips, his mouth tied at the top of his face. The ventriloquist's transparent belly contains a host of imaginary creatures, perhaps the ventriloquist's vocal interpretations of the natural citizenry of the moors, a kind of primordial or wild nature, while he seems to be captivating yet another at the bottom of the painting. Merleau-Ponty notes Cézanne saying, "The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness."⁸ That the body of the ventriloquist exhibits transparency reflects a certain uniqueness of the act: that ventriloquism is illusion without deception. Further, in a more general way, ambiguity, a central concept in Merleau-Ponty's theory of being — presence and absence, incarnation and transcendence for example are paralleled in the ventriloquist's effacement

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of herself as speaker while presenting herself as an alternate persona. And, we have in this painting something Merleau-Ponty believes the artist does generally: "... he is spelling out nature at the moment he is recreating it."⁹

In the usual case, the strange speech act of the ventriloquist is a paradigm case of the prosthetic. The dummy is attached to the ventriloquist as an extension of her body and her potential abilities — what she does with her hands in manipulating her dummy as she pretends to listen while speaking is as much a part of her attempt at illusion as keeping her lips still. The ventriloquist and the dummy, like the subject-object, form a binary relationship — there is no one without the other. However, in Klee's ventriloquial painting, it would seem that there is no apparent external object to play the role of the usual mechanism for the object of the ventriloquist's "thrown voice." While this may warrant no explanation, it is sufficiently curious to deserve some comment and one that is particularly relevant to Merleau-Ponty's work, having to do with one of his more significant remarks. He says,

The painter lives in fascination. The actions most proper to him ... seem to emanate from the things themselves ... Inevitably, the roles between him and the visible are reversed ... That is why so many painters have said that things look at them. As André Marchand says, after Klee, 'In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me ... I was there listening. I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it.'¹⁰

Merleau-Ponty says, "Things pass into us as we into things."¹¹ In this painting by Klee, it is the forest, the inhabitants of the moors as approximately imitated or interpreted by the ventriloquist that have penetrated the ventriloquist's body as the body had first to penetrate it. The penetration of the visible world is what the perceiver sees while at the same time what is invisible is meaning; what the perceiver imposes upon the world that speaks to him. The world is not passive but folds back upon the perceiver. In short, it is nature itself, displayed as moors, that replaces the traditional dummy in Klee's painting, but it is the ventriloquist speaking for an otherwise silent world. Galen Johnson asks, "Why is it that painters have so often said, in the manner of Klee, that the forest is speaking in them, or the trees were looking at them, or why did Cézanne say that 'nature is on the inside?'" It must be that there is a system of exchange between body and world such that eye and hand become the obverse side of things, the inside of an outside in which are

both enveloped.”¹² On this account, Klee’s painting illustrates the interactivity between the body and the animated moors. And this, according to Johnson, is the opposite of what we might expect.¹³

In many cases of prosthesis or prosthesis-like effects, its removal would result in a significant step backwards, a change in the status and powers of the perceiving body so that without the cane the blind man is a man less mobile. This may be an awkward way of emphasizing that as the violin expands the powers of the player, the identity of the body playing is also altered so that the prosthesis is a factor in identification of the violin player as well. As in the case of the ventriloquist and her dummy, one identifies the other. It is a marriage of sorts between this couple, self and world, that would be misleading at best to think of each as independent — misleading not to accept a wider, if temporary, perceptual view of the self in action. With the prosthetic as with the ventriloquist act, it is possible to see the inanimate and animate merely as separate objects, but in both cases the point of it all would be missed entirely.

Flesh and Chiasm – an aesthetic connection

A great deal of literature has been devoted to Merleau-Ponty’s dual notions of chiasm and flesh. Not the least reason for this volume is the difficulty in interpreting just what Merleau-Ponty was up to regarding his choice of those particular, imaginative terms. My interest in this section of the paper is to link these concepts with Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetically relevant concerns rather than offer an extensive ontological account.

In his book *Action and Agency in Dialogue*, François Cooren says, “The term embodiment or its Latin version, *incarnation*, etymologically refers to the act of being made flesh (*carnis* means flesh in Latin) or being given a body. ... While the term *incarnation* is often used in a religious context ... it is noteworthy that (Harold) Garfinkel did not hesitate to use this terminology to refer to the incarnated character of things” as diverse as rules, norms, mutual understandings, and even institutions to the extent that they are shown to be “‘incarnately displayed’ in interaction.”¹⁴ The use of the word flesh appears in Sartre’s *Being and Nothing* in his chapter on the body, where

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he uses it as recognition of the Other stripped of its particulars (race, ethnicity, etc.), mere corporeals but always in a situation. He adds that such an affective apprehension of its contingency results in a particular kind of *nausea*.¹⁵ No doubt Merleau-Ponty would like to retain this visceral connotation as flesh passes between the world of the body to the body of the world of things. The word 'flesh' helps to emphasize that which is soft, flexible, and supple as the flesh of the body takes on the forms of a world that is neither linear nor monolithic but rather gains its meaning as it folds itself towards our own bodily flesh. This unfolding in the reversibility of perception implies a route that is not simple and direct but tends to take on meaning in a variety of directions. The landscape, he says, is overrun with words. Even when one perceives red in a certain context, the red belongs to a constellation of reds, the Revolution, "certain terrains near Aix or Madagascar," red garments, not to mention a set of personal associations that may return to the seer with a swarm of emotions.¹⁶

Merleau-Ponty says, "That the presence of the world is precisely the presence of my flesh to its flesh, that 'I am of the world' and that I am not it, this is what is no sooner said than forgotten: metaphysics remains coincidence."¹⁷ This two-sided feature of flesh, belonging to our bodies and the world, is described this way by Jerry Gill:

Flesh not only serves as the exterior line of demarcation for the individual subject, but it serves as well as the point or veil of the connection with the 'outside' world. In short, flesh faces in two directions at once and thereby unites us with as well as separates us from the world of things and persons in which we are situated. Moreover, flesh breathes or seeps, as well as containing or separating. ... In this sense, Merleau-Ponty sees the fleshly character of our embodiment as limiting or grafting us to one another as well as providing our individual entry point into the world.¹⁸

This dual nature is distinguished in art by a flesh that perceives and a flesh that cannot.

In "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty sees the artist in the example of Cézanne, deviating from the practical but habitual world of "man-made objects" suspending a world of familiarity and comfort. Here we can find an artist's extension of the body as contrasted with the prosthetic effect of the woman and her hat, the man and his automobile. It is a matter of dislocation as with the ventriloquist and acquaintance with an alternate vision. He says,

We live in a world of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through human actions, which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all this exists necessarily and unshakably. Cézanne's painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. This is why Cézanne's people are strange, as if viewed by another species. Nature itself is stripped of its attributes which make it ready for animistic communions: there is no wind in the landscape, no movement on the Lac d'Annecy; the frozen objects hesitate as at the beginning of the world.¹⁹

With Cézanne and so for the indefinite possibilities of art, Merleau-Ponty sees the prosthetic connection of a body with a world unveiled — a primitive landscape, like the moors for Klee, intimately and animatedly portrayed. It is an astounding possibility of picturing a nature that cannot any longer be perceived.

This animistic communion is an understanding of the world as flesh. As Merleau-Ponty says of Cézanne's painting, the landscape "is caught alive in a net which would let nothing escape."²⁰ But for Merleau-Ponty, the world is reflecting and inviting us, attracting us at all perspectival turns, an inescapable occasion for meaning. One might say that Cézanne has seeped into some of the many alternate aspects of the chiasm and visualized it, rendering it with meaning that had not to that point been the object of any seer — previously invisible. If we return to the idea that artists interrogate the world and engage it in dialogue, reversing the direction of the artist's imposition upon the world, we might say that Cézanne has asked some unusual ontological questions about how some aspects of the chiasmatic world might appear to his body. And, says Merleau-Ponty, "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings."²¹

On this interpretation, the world is seductive — the case of Odysseus tied to the mast is simply universal. As Fred Evans says, "Objects solicit our bodies, that is, ourselves, and we complete their meaning within the setting where they appear to us: they beckon to us, we render them more definite, and each, from the very beginning, requires the other in order to be that invitation and that response. So intertwined are we with what we encounter that Merleau-Ponty says, 'the world is wholly inside {me} and I am wholly outside myself.'"²²

Artistic Identity

In his article, “The Origins of Selves,” Daniel Dennett argues against what he calls a fixed and minimal self in favor of one where our personal boundaries, as with Merleau-Ponty, may in certain circumstances change by virtue of expanding. He says, “[A] minimal self is not a thing inside a lobster or a lark, and it is not the ‘whole lobster’ or the ‘whole lark’ either; it is something abstract which amounts just to the existence of an organization which tends to distinguish, control, and preserve portions of the world, an organization that thereby creates and maintains boundaries.”²³ Dennett argues for a view of selves unbounded by bodies that is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s extended embodiment.

The intimate relationship between an artist and what she has achieved reflects the kind of extended boundaries of self that the name of the artist exemplifies and in this sense is like a prosthetic effect. The artist’s personal body of work, the achievements of the past, their domain of chronological location, is part of the artist’s body of the present. Merleau-Ponty says, “There is no essence, no idea, that does not *adhere* to a domain of history and geography.”²⁴ What occurs in terms of artistic identity is a dynamic relationship between past and present.

This familiar idea that the artist’s life and work are to be connected in an intimate or personal contextualism is echoed by Merleau-Ponty. Jonathan Gilmore notes that, “Merleau-Ponty will reject the dichotomy between self and its external attributes, actions and experiences. ... For Merleau-Ponty, art, artist, and artist’s life are interdependent ... Merleau-Ponty will introduce a way of conceiving of art as reflecting its creator’s life, but not transparently. That is, Merleau-Ponty will argue that this internal relation reflects contingencies in how the work and life should unfold.”²⁵

The word ‘chiasm’ like the term ‘prosthetic’ is borrowed from general medical research. It designates a complex set of intersecting, intertwining relationships, some invisible like the institutions under which we operate and the events that form a history. For example, the third baseman mentioned earlier as an example of a situated prosthetic effect is also intimately connected to the institution of baseball with its set of constitutive and regulative rules as well as to past statistics that are relevant to his post

and, if professional, the in-person and beamed lineup of fans throughout the world. The diner is aligned with farms and commerce, with sets of recipes and their creators, and with the silversmiths and inventors of eating utensils and the textile industries for napkins and tablecloths.

The insistence on contextualism broader than the artist's work is many-faceted for Merleau-Ponty, but he is quick to understand it as a kind of anti-elitism; that art is only a part of but connected to any artist's life who lives in a world like others. Here is one example from his numerous accounts:

If we take the painter's point of view in order to be present at that decisive moment when what has been given to him to live as corporeal destiny, personal adventures or historical events crystallizes into 'the motive,' we will recognize that his work, which is never an effect, is always a response to these data, and that the body, the life, the landscapes, the schools, the mistresses, the creditors, the police, and the revolutions which might suffocate painting are also the bread his work consecrates. To live in painting is still to breathe the air of this world — above all for the man who sees something in the world of paint. And there is a little of him in every man.²⁶

Succinctly put, in "Cezanne's Doubt" he says, "We never get away from our life."²⁷

Descartes, Ventriloquism, Speech, and Phantom Limbs

In one of Merleau-Ponty's many expressions of anti-Cartesianism, he says, "A Cartesian does not see himself when he looks in the mirror; he sees a dummy, an 'outside,' which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way."²⁸ I hope to make use of the ideas of ventriloquial illusion and prosthetic effect as it relates to Descartes by recalling his work on phantom limb pains, which is an absence of flesh made relevant by virtue of illusion. The illusion of ventriloquism is something like what happens at the movies where the sound system, aptly called speakers, is dislocated from the speakers (the mouths of the speakers) visually presented, the characters whose visual images are apart from their voice source on the screen but completing the seamless illusion. In a remarkably similar sense, the

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Cartesian body is the object of an illusion and, as I will argue, a prosthetic of the mind.

To begin with, Descartes, who holds that the greatest prejudice we have retained from infancy is that of believing that brutes think, is notorious for his claim that animals are mere automata, material bodies without minds. While they move about on their own and are more complex, animals are but nevertheless something like the dummies of the ventriloquist, a certain species of mechanical thing. While Descartes is more generous towards the souls of animals in his *Passions of the Soul* — more than in his *Discourse on Method* — animals have no thoughts though they may exhibit pain behavior without feeling pain. Descartes' evidence for the inability of animals to think is that they have no capacity for speech. Descartes' claim regarding animals was true too for the bodies of humans so that ontologically animals and human *bodies* are comparable. In a certain post-Hobbesian spirit, Descartes, a great dissector of corpses, says, "I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform all the same movements as it now does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will or, consequently, of the mind."²⁹ Here is where the idea of illusion rises to the occasion. Since bodies cannot feel pain, the mind helpfully judges its location at the point of bodily damage where the pain is not since pain is only in the mind. For Descartes then, I am merely under the illusion that the pain is in my foot when I step on a nail.

Aware of what we call phantom limb pains, Descartes says, "I had heard that those who had a leg or an arm amputated sometimes still seemed to feel pain intermittently in the missing part of the body."³⁰ Cleverly, the illusion that the pain is in my foot when I step on a nail is something like a bizarre reversal of phantom limb pains. In phantom limb phenomena, the pain might seem to be coming from a foot I do not have. For Descartes, in the more usual case, there is illusion in that pain seems to come from a foot I do have. I am under an illusion in each case, but when the pain in my foot seems to come from my foot when the foot I have is injured but instead comes from the mind, it is hardly a coincidence. It is, for Descartes, an illusion fostered by the goodness of God but congruent actually with good Darwinian reasons.

In a scenario that resembles the act of the ventriloquist, Descartes, writing in *Meditation Six*, says, “Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit.”³¹ This well-known sailor analogy has its ventriloquial vocabulary: being closely joined to, intermingled with, forming a unit are good enough to characterize the ventriloquist/dummy connection. But since it is speech that interests me here, my point is that for Descartes, the human body itself takes on a role similar to the dummy with the mind akin to the vocal source of the ventriloquist. While the location of speech, unlike the ventriloquist’s dummy, comes from the public body, its origin comes from the non-corporeal, animate but private mind, made audible by the body. It is an interior projecting its thoughts on an exterior — or so the logic of dualism goes — and I am tempted to parallel the ventriloquist’s act by calling this a dislocation of vocality. However, since the mind has no location, is not capable of being extended or closely joined with anything at all, the parallel there falls short. So goes this *reductio*.

Here, Descartes’ view of animals and the privileging of his own mind to ward off the illusions presented by the body is only a special case of his initial general solipsism, a dismissing of the body as a source of knowledge and a determiner of the body’s navigation through its immediate environment. If we recall how flesh can exclude solipsism by virtue of an interactive relationship and how the artist reveals the body’s potential in portraying a world outside our habitual routines, we should see how Merleau-Ponty’s anti-Cartesian stance is central to his philosophy of the arts.

Conversation with Others

As mentioned earlier, for Merleau-Ponty there is a dual aspect to perception. There is the seer for example and the seen — those who see the seer from a variety of perspectives. In writing about being in communication with others, Merleau-Ponty says:

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Henceforth as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and another person's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously. ... There is one particular cultural object, which is destined to play a crucial role in the perception of other people: language. In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us are the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behavior in my transcendental field nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity.³²

So then, the notion of a prosthetic applies to those entities we call persons and in particular to persons in certain common kinds of conversation, those where saying and thinking as in most cases of speaking cannot be distinguished and conversation that makes clear the improvisational aspects of verbal exchange. Here, in conversation, is one way the prosthetic effect is extremely strong: that our conversational partners are like the prosthetics of ourselves. In his set, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he says this of Sartre, "He became aware that all attempts to live apart were hypocritical because we are all mysteriously related, because others see us and so become an inalienable dimension of our lives — become, in fact, ourselves."³³ And, we should recall that for Merleau-Ponty, the body is to be compared not to a physical object but to a work of art, a system of meanings "as a focal point of living meanings" where the perception of the world is personal and unabashedly anthropomorphic.

Conclusion

Breaking with traditional empiricist epistemology, Merleau-Ponty envisions an active perceiver that is at times inseparable from a complex and intersecting world — one that folds back upon that perceiver as he/she chooses to navigate through it. Through what I have called a prosthetic metaphor, I have hoped to show how Merleau-Ponty's view of the arts is enriched by its use in drawing together, seeing as one, the artist's body and the artistic environment. The prosthetic helps to explain Merleau-Ponty's view of a diversity of artistic phenomena and experiences, including the artistic identity of the artist and his/her work and the performances of the

acts of creation and the place of the artist's roles in time, collapsing temporal distance between the artist's presence and the revisable history of art. It is a perspective that would be seriously impoverished without keeping in mind this unlikely metaphor from medical reconstruction.

With regard to prosthesis, I have distinguished two kinds that are relevant to Merleau-Ponty's various views on art and the artist. There is, for Merleau-Ponty, a practical perceptual immediacy for which the prosthetic metaphor is important. However, there is also the more general, universal ontology where the concepts of flesh and chiasm stretch the body's intimacy with the world forming an intimate binary — a situated body and a complex, intersecting world that folds back upon it. The artist is in the best position to capture the results of interrogating a world that beckons to us in reversal of meaning from world objects to bodily flesh. For each kind of prosthesis, there is a chronological relevance in that each represents a different stage in Merleau-Ponty's thinking — especially as contributions to his theory of aesthetics and its importance for his philosophy more generally. 

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Notes

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1 Fred Rush, *On Architecture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 21.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 143.

5 Garry Hagberg, *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 173.

6 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 23.

7 Galen Johnson, "Phenomenology and Painting: 'Cezanne's Doubt,'" in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 43.

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 17.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press 1964) 56.

10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 167.

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 123.

12 Galen Johnson, "Ontology and Painting: 'Eye and Mind,'" in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 47.

13 One further remark about Klee's painting and about what is missing from this ventriloquial representation: As a performer, the ventriloquist (in the usual case) requires an audience — a knowing audience who is in on the act. It is a visual deception buttressed by a dual vocality. But here we have what Merleau-Ponty calls the ambiguity of the word "vision" as the ventriloquist is the seer and the seen. The visible too relates to both the seer and the seen as a parallel to what Sartre would call being-in-itself and being-for-others. Among Sartre's dozens of illustrations of this is the voyeur discovered in the act of voyeurism in a sudden shift of consciousness and of his self-identification.

14 François Cooren, *Action and Agency in Dialogue* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Johns Benjamin Publishing, 2010), 142.

- 15 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 421.
- 16 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 132.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 18 J. R. Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1991), 60.
- 19 Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, 16.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 21 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 162.
- 22 Fred Evans, "Chiasm and Flesh," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Acumen, 2008), 180.
- 23 Daniel Dennett, "The Origin of Selves," in *Self and Identity*, eds. Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 358.
- 24 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 115.
- 25 Jonathan Gilmore, "Between Philosophy and Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 293.
- 26 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, *Ibid.* 64.
- 27 Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, 25.
- 28 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 170.
- 29 René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 119.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 113–114.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 32 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 354.
- 33 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 45.

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