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THE SPACE OF DRAWING: THE PLACE OF ART IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY'S THINKING OF THE VISIBLE

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In this article we engage with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim as it is articulated in his famous last work, 'Eye and Mind', that Descartes' account of space derived from the Renaissance art of perspective. We argue that not only is this account of space an essential element of Cartesian metaphysics, but that it plays a key role in modern philosophy and modern science. In part our aim is to underscore Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the role that art plays in the genesis of the modern conception of space. However, we also argue that by way of this recognition, Merleau-Ponty seeks to release us from the limitations of this conception of space and the view of the human subject it entails, and return us to the world upon which the acts of drawing and painting draw, namely the ambiguous world of perception replete with creative potential.

Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty published just three essays on art — ‘Cezanne’s Doubt’ (1993a [1945]), ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’ (1993b [1952]), and ‘Eye and Mind’ (1993c [1960]).¹ Despite this slender output, he is regarded as one of the twentieth century’s greatest philosophers of art. Not only is what he says directly about art creative and powerful, his entire philosophical endeavour, dedicated to showing that if we knowers have never really known ourselves it is because we have not truly thought our bodily-being, is informed by an artist’s sensitivity to perception and the perceived world.² His engagement with art is not for all that simply a matter of personal inclination or disposition;³ for Merleau-Ponty, reflection on art is what forces philosophy — the thinking of thinking — into a reconsideration of its essence.

Although we are here primarily concerned with what Merleau-Ponty says about drawing, underlying our argument is this claim that art makes on philosophy, and which amounts to the admission that art is not the indifferent object of philosophical scrutiny (the mode of scrutiny constitutive of the regional discipline of aesthetics). Art is the very condition of philosophy’s possibility, for the enquiring mind, far from being sufficient unto itself, owes its illumination to the divine fire of artistic inspiration.



FIGURE 1 VANESSA FIRTH UNTITLED 2018

¹ All three essays are available together in English in G.A. Johnson 1993. Johnson details their publication history in his ‘Introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Painting’, pp. 3-55.

² For example, in the essay ‘Since Lascaux’, Olivier Mongin writes that, ‘aesthetics permanently subtends Merleau-Ponty’s thought and permeates his entire work, to the point of becoming synonymous with his philosophical reflection.’ (Mongin, 1993: 245). Mongin is echoing Michel Lefevre: ‘To the degree that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a phenomenology of perception, it may be said to be in its entirety within the domain of aesthetics.’ (Lefevre, 1976: 353).

³ For just such a claim, see Dufrenne 1990: ‘I would willingly say that if Merleau-Ponty chose to write ‘Eye and Mind,’ it is simply because he loved painting.’ (74)

Our intention in what follows is to explain the role and significance Merleau-Ponty attributes to drawing in modern philosophy's construction of its understanding of space. However, before we get into this argument, we would like first to introduce the heart of Merleau-Ponty's late enterprise, with the aim of providing sufficient context to understand the place and significance of drawing in relation to philosophy.

1. The Dismemberment of the Lived Body

As its title suggests, in 'Eye and Mind' Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the relation between *aísthēsis* and *nóēsis*, or, as these terms have been appropriated by the modern age, the relation between *intuition* and *understanding*, between *body* and *mind*. This affirmation apparently borders on the banal, for it can hardly be said to circumscribe a limited horizon of inquiry within which Merleau-Ponty's investigations can be shown to have a certain sense, justification or structural necessity. However, what we wish to highlight in making this affirmation is that rather than simply consisting of a positive thesis, expressed in positive, affirmative judgements, 'Eye and Mind' is the continuation, or better, the instantiation, of Merleau-Ponty's claim that phenomenology is either 'all or nothing', and it is thus an attempt to appropriate the philosophical tradition — through its repetition — by a reflection on both eye and mind.

The understanding of this relation — or better, the modulation of the understanding of this relation — is historically definitive. The human being has long been seen as a peculiar double, as a strange duality of *psychē* and *sōma*, mind and body. Aristotle's definition of the human as *zōon logon echon* presents us with a being, an animal, which possesses *logos*, language. A similar doubling is found in the Latinate tradition, which defines the human as the *rational animal*; yet this time, in contrast to Aristotle, reason sets us against our own animality. This same doubling arrives at its most acute formulation in the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes, which leaves us with what we have come to know as the mind-body problem — the rending of the human being into two discreet substances, a material body and an immaterial mind, the interaction of which it is impossible to explain.

For Merleau-Ponty, the mind-body problem is no mere category mistake arising from a deficiency of thinking, an error that could be corrected by thinking more carefully.⁴ The metaphysical sundering of the mind and the body is an event — it is an occurrence with real historical consequences, consequences thoroughly implicated in our experience of ourselves and our world. Modern science and modern technology as much as modern philosophy are outcomes of this division. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, they are 'monsters born' from the 'dismemberment' of the human being, and they consequently disinvest us of our lived experience of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 138).

By attending phenomenologically to our embodied experience, Merleau-Ponty discovers beneath the dissociated substances of mind and body, as their fundamental ground and possibility, the *corporeal* self. This is a self that exists neither entirely as consciousness nor as a thing, and which thus eludes the classical philosophies of reflection and empirical science since it is neither wholly transparent to itself nor wholly knowable as an objective given.

This corporeal self's experience of itself and of its world is, then, essentially ambiguous, unclear and uncertain, and it is closer to the perception of the world presented in painting and poetry than the world-pictures found in either modern science or modern philosophy. For this reason, it has often been suggested that Merleau-Ponty appeals to the arts to disinter this primordial corporeal being, and bring to

⁴ Gilbert Ryle (2000) makes the classic statement of this view — although Ryle would say that the error originated in the misuse of language.

light the ambiguous perception of the world that it entails — a world which is replete with possibilities precisely because its givenness is ambiguous and uncertain. As common as such claims are, they miss something essential. In ‘Eye and Mind’, Merleau-Ponty’s appeal to art — or more precisely his appeal to painting and to drawing — is more complex, more nuanced. It is not undertaken with the aim of simply translating into theory the lessons of drawing and painting, as if Merleau-Ponty’s sole intent were to say with clarity and distinctness what the artist had obscurely felt — the original, ambiguous unity of mind and world that had inspired her to paint and draw. Instead, Merleau-Ponty’s intention is to offer a genealogy of the mind-body problem, by way of which he is able to provide a perspective on the central philosophical problem of modernity, namely how it was possible that the reflection on our practice of thinking, how the attempt to grasp and sustain the essence of transcendence, issued into an objectification of thought itself.⁵ The question, then, is how painting and drawing help explain this problem, and how they hold out the promise of its overcoming.

2. The Mind’s Eye: Modern Philosophy’s Thinking of the Visible

What Merleau-Ponty finds in modern philosophical thought – in the ‘philosophy of reflection’ as he calls it – is the attempt to comprehend both what the world is and our relation to the world through the separation of *aísthēsis* from *nóēsis*, eye from mind, and their ‘reconciliation’ under the rule of reason. What this reconciliation then amounts to is a *theoretical* appropriation of our lived experience, a methodological reconstruction based on, but disavowing, ‘a brute, existent world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 122). For the philosophy of reflection our experience, our contact with the world, must be, and can only be, presented as meaningful if it is rendered explicit and unambiguous, if, that is, it is grasped in the *form of a thought* of the world. At one stroke, the very possibility of meaning, the meaning of meaning, comes to have its condition in a thought in contact with itself, in thought’s effort at an internal adequation.

Prior to this idea of thought in absolute possession of itself, Merleau-Ponty recovers an inherence of thought in the sensible, and, consequently, reconfigures the very meaning of *aísthēsis* as such. The movement or, and to use this term with a certain reservation, the method of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking is what he terms a *hyperreflection* — a thinking that does not reduce itself to a mere consequence or simple effect of a material given, as in the case of empiricism, but which unearths the ground of thinking in its factual enrootedness in the world. As Merleau-Ponty says, this *hyperreflection* is:

what takes hold of me as I am in the act of forming the ideas of subject and object, and brings to light the source of these two ideas; it is reflection, not only in operation, but conscious of itself in operation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 219)

Stated quite formally *hyperreflection* represents the overcoming of the aporias of the philosophy of reflection. *Prima facie* this movement of thought would appear closely to resemble the Hegelian sublation of the historical problems of transcendental philosophy. However, whereas Hegel overcomes the limitations of Kantian critique in attempting to ground thought in and from itself — that is an absolute *nóēsis* that recovers the aesthetic as but an alienated moment of itself — Merleau-Ponty, on

⁵ Merleau-Ponty speaks of a genealogical phenomenology in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962: 220). Genealogy is itself the explicitly philosophical response to the mind-body problem. To believe that this problem can be solved, as if it were a puzzle, in thought alone, is itself the consequence of the separation of mind from body, whereas what Merleau-Ponty tries to do is replay the foundational themes of modern philosophical thought, to grasp their meaning, motivation and origin and thereby de(con)struct that thought’s purchase on reality.

the other hand, recovers an originary intertwining of *nóēsis* in *aísthēsis*, in, that is, a *logos* of the perceived world. As a result, it is this intertwining that requires a rehabilitation of the ontological value of art after and beyond the Hegelian thesis of art's end.

There are two points worthy of consideration here. The first is that this rehabilitation of art by Merleau-Ponty is not employed as an illustrative example of a thesis — which would once again be the abstract reduction of art to an ideal meaning, a separation of a form from a content — but a return to art in order to understand how it shapes and informs our understanding of the inherence of form in content, of *aísthēsis* in *nóēsis*, of, in other words, an inherence of meaning *in* the world. It is therefore an affirmation of art as a 'central operation contributing to the definition of our access to Being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 132). The second, and related point, is that Merleau-Ponty's rehabilitation of art should not be understood as a summary judgement or critique of the Hegelian thesis that, for modernity, art no longer constitutes a formative experience. Rather, on the contrary, it is the case that in 'Eye and Mind' he implicitly affirms both that the Hegelian thesis offers the truth of modernity and that this thesis can only be comprehended by a reconsideration of the essence of art itself.

How to think, then, the essence of the modern understanding of art? As is known for Hegel the end of art is realised within the self-recognition of truth as *Begriff*; a truth that cannot find an expression in sensuous experience but only in the immanence of thinking unto itself. This thesis — one that cannot be understood apart from the question of ontology — is one that Merleau-Ponty traces through the Cartesian reduction of truth to subjective certainty. For Descartes, insofar as truth is determined on and with the self-grounding of the *cogito* as an immanent act, the world as given to the body is rendered superfluous. Consequently, objects and ideas are not perceived as mediated through the senses, rather they exist with the same necessity as the *cogito* and are part of it — it is not the eyes that see, *for example*, but the mind itself that constructs the visible as an order of thought. Consequently, for Descartes, there can be no question of according to painting a meaning in itself: it is a technique of rendering the visible by means of signs and indices sufficient for us to form an idea of the thing represented, but which in no way contributes to its definition: both are merely impoverished 'variant[s] of thinking, where thinking is canonically defined according to intellectual possession and evidence' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 132).

We should note here, however, that the question of vision and of painting is not merely brought forth in 'Eye and Mind' as one example amongst others of this subordination of *aesthesis* to *noesis*. Rather, it has a singular significance, and it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty appeals to art in order both to trace the genesis of this subordination and to extricate our thinking from its grip. Two arguments suffice to show this:

1) Vision is the exemplary vehicle of this subordination inasmuch as it is the *eídos*, the outward and visible aspect that a thing offers to the eye, that becomes the visible in an emphatic sense — *the idea* —, and which finally re-appropriates actual vision as a confused version of itself, thus realising the independence of the world of thought from the 'world' in the 'real' sense of the word. Merleau-Ponty does not claim, however, that the *metaphor* of sight is unwarranted, that there is an ocularcentric bias to modernity, and that, consequently, we should instead think in terms of a more 'tactile' or 'corporeal', that is to say, pragmatic relation to the world. Rather he suggests that modernity has always already determined the very idea of sight, of seeing, through the *metaphor of touch*, by way, that is, of the

Begriff.⁶ Thus Merleau-Ponty is in accord with Heidegger's — perhaps surprising — account of metaphysics as that way of thinking that is too abstract because it tries too hard to be concrete; as that thinking that determines Being by way of its understanding of beings, and which, consequently elects the factual at the expense of the possible. It is, then, the very prevalence of the metaphor of thought as vision that hides the reduction of vision to the mastery of touch.

2) The determination of transcendence — the *arête* of the human being — by way of sight is valid inasmuch as it is the peculiar virtue of vision '[to show] more than itself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 138). Sight is more than the passive reception of stimuli, of sensations, it points beyond itself and brings us into a relation with 'external' being, it opens up a field of existence, it goes beyond the situation that has occasioned it by means of its capacity to *express*. As Merleau-Ponty writes, it is,

capable of leaping over distances, piercing into the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations — a meaning — in the inconceivable flatness of being ... it possesses this world at a distance rather than being possessed by it.
(Merleau-Ponty, 1993b: 103—4)

It is by reflecting on the nature of sight, then, Merleau-Ponty shows that modernity, which, with Kant, finally comes to determine the essence of the human being on the ground of its spatio-temporal intuition, had a certain validity insofar as it took its inspiration from the nature of sight, and yet, in the end, denied what it sought by reducing sight to a *pure mathematical intuition*. This domination of the visible by the rational, the determination of *aisthesis* by *noesis*, is reductive in a two-fold sense. On the one hand it gives us the visible, but the visible abstracted from a specific point of view so as to arrive at a notation of the world which will be valid for all, a particularity, then, that becomes absolute by forgetting its origin in the 'flesh of the world'. On the other hand, and in order to forget, it has to reduce that dimension which is characterised by the ambivalent implication of seer, seen and world, the 'existential dimension' of depth.

3. On Cartesian Space, Drawing and the Art of Perspective

According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes, the architect of modernity, took inspiration from the experiments with perspective undertaken by the artists — the painters, the draughtsmen, the engravers — of the Renaissance. Their innovations did not just help Descartes express his ideas about space; they helped him have those ideas.

Before we consider how Descartes derives these ideas from Renaissance perspective it is first necessary to make some remarks on the relation between drawing, perspective and the fine arts — in particular painting — as they have been classically conceived. Etymologically, the word 'drawing' comes from the Proto-Germanic *draganan*. Its root sense is 'to impart motion by pulling; to drag, to haul, to trail or tug'. From this root, an indefinite series of meanings and usages branches out. It comes to be applied to the act of tracing a line or figure by the action of drawing a mark-making tool (a bone, chalk, charcoal, a

⁶ The German term *Begriff* is a modification of the verb *greifen* — 'to grip'. The *Begriff* is the concept that lays hold of, or that grips, what it comprehends. In English we speak of grasping the sense of something when we employ an idea properly. In the essay 'The Grip (Mainmise)', Jean-François Lyotard considers the thematic of gripping or grasping in Western thought. Lyotard is principally concerned with the notion of emancipation, but his remarks are relevant to the point we are making insofar as it touches on the Cartesian project of mastery of self and nature. He writes, 'Born children, our task would be to enter into full possession of ourselves. Master and possessor, as Descartes put it, thus insisting on the act of seizure, an act to be carried out on the self of existing things (called nature).' (Lyotard, 1993: 148)

stylus, a pencil, a pen), across a surface, as one draws a plough through the soil, cutting a furrow. To draw, in this sense, when applied to the arts, or when used of the act of drawing, denotes the making of a mark, perhaps even an incision.



Figure 2 Albrecht Dürer *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman* circa 1600

It is customary to oppose drawing as the making of a mark, to painting.⁷ In his treatise *On Painting*, Alberti says that the painter (the term *painter* as he uses it is synonymous with our *artist*) is concerned with the visible – ‘no one,’ he says, ‘will deny that things which are not visible do not concern the painter, for he strives to represent only the things that are seen’ (Alberti, 1991: 37). According to Alberti, painting is, then, a figurative art, and the function of the painter is ‘to draw with lines and paint in colours [...] bodies’ (Alberti, 1991: 87). According to this definition, drawing is, as Félix Ravaisson says, painting ‘simplified’, abstracted ‘from colour in all its variety’ (Ravaisson, 2016: 160), and reduced to the depiction of visible forms.

Drawing is not for all that merely an impoverished variant of painting. Classically conceived, drawing is the depiction or delineation of the ‘borderlines of surfaces and their proportions’ (Alberti, 1991: 47). Since these borderlines and proportions together comprise the shapes and forms of things, it can be rightly said that ‘the one who draws [...] holds the key to all [the figurative] arts’ (Ravaisson, 2016: 160).⁸

⁷ In truth, this conventional demarcation is unstable as the experiments of modern and contemporary artists with line and mark remind us. Cy Twombly, for example, has ceaselessly undone the distinction between the linear art of drawing and painting. Peter Schjeldahl (2005) has described Twombly’s ‘paintings’ as ‘seemingly random distributions of smudges and scribbles on large canvases’, and as ‘flurries of impulsive line in pencil, crayon, or paint.’ He goes on to invoke Twombly’s ‘loopy tumults of line in white wax crayon on grounds of dark-grey house paint’, which he says, ‘resemble chalked blackboards.’ In conversation with Nicholas Serota (2008), Twombly himself commented on the relation between his own works and graffiti: ‘graffiti is linear and it’s done with a pencil, and it’s like writing on walls. But [in my paintings] it’s more lyrical [...] it’s graffiti but it’s something else, too.’ In fact, the distinction between painting and drawing is not only recently unmade by the transgressions of modern art; the distinction is always already inhabited by instability inasmuch as the artist’s line carries a qualitative inflection essential to it, while the geometer’s line is a measure of magnitude only. Through this inflection the line is always open to, or caught up in, colour. Even if it is itself an art of definition, the art of drawing is, then, not easily defined. That said, the distinction between painting and drawing that serves to define both cannot simply be set aside, as if it were an arbitrary artifice. To be sure, there is no line that is not coloured – least of all the artist’s line, which is, as we have already said, always a visible sign and qualitative mark. Nevertheless, drawing and painting are opposed as line and surface are. The former is the art of the line, whereas painting, which is the art of colour, is for that reason, the art of surfaces.

⁸ Ravaisson drew his views from the principles of ‘the great masters’ (Ravaisson, 2016: 159). Those views had considerable influence on the teaching of drawing in France in the latter part of the 19th century. In 1853, the Minister for Public Instruction appointed Ravaisson to chair a commission on the reform of the teaching of drawing in schools. The article cited here was written for Ferdinand Buisson’s 1882 *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d’instruction primaire*.

This idea of drawing as the key to all the figurative arts, is captured in the idea of *disegno* as it was developed in the Italian Renaissance, and which, in its contrast to the art of *colore*, initiates a dispute that resonates long thereafter in the history of art.⁹ As well as designating the technique of drawing, *disegno* denoted the creative idea sketched-out and made apparent in the drawing – the preliminary design that is, at the same time, the underpinning structure and thus the final form of the finished painting.

The technique of perspective is an essential element – if not *the* essential element – of drawing so conceived. For if the visual artist is concerned to depict bodies not as they are abstractly, then these bodies are subject to deformation dependent on their distance and position vis-à-vis the viewer – shortened according to their obliquity, shrunk according to their distance. It is the function of drawing, then, to depict the visual form of bodies as they present themselves to the viewer, and that means insofar as they appear perspectively.

Now, as Merleau-Ponty shows, the artistic practice of *perspectiva artificialis* plays a constitutive role in the genesis of Cartesian metaphysics by virtue of the conception of space that Descartes derives from it.¹⁰ To unpack the philosophical significance of this claim we have first to understand how the practice operates. Paradoxically, and as many others beside Merleau-Ponty have noted, in its very attempt to render depth it distorts it.¹¹ Merleau-Ponty offers an account in the following terms:

[The artist] sees the tree nearby, then he directs his gaze further into the distance, to the road, before finally looking to the horizon; the apparent dimensions of the other objects change each time he stares at a different point. On the canvas, he arranges things such that what he represents is no more than a compromise between these various different visual impressions: he strives to find a common denominator to all these perceptions by rendering each object not with the size, colours and aspect it present when the painter fixes it in his gaze but rather with the conventional size and aspect that it would present in a gaze directed at a particular vanishing point on the horizon. (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 40)

When following this technique the artist arranges objects on the canvas along lines that run from herself towards a point marked on the horizon. By projecting these lines she is able to open the canvas onto a space. However, these lines are not anchored by the artist's particular perspective; instead, they are assimilated into a geometrized projection, a perspectiveless position that embraces all particular points of view. Because of this, the space that the canvas opens on to is a space that 'remains absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogenous' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 134). By opening the canvas onto this space, painting becomes the ancillary of representation. From here, the painter's task is to arrange

⁹ The distinction between drawing and painting was not the invention of the Italian Renaissance, but it underscored the sixteenth century *paragone* between the partisans of *colore* on the one hand, and *disegno* on the other, the former championing Titian, the latter Michelangelo. The dispute passed down through the antagonism in the late 17th-century *Academie* between the *Poussinistes* and the *Rubenistes*, through to the twentieth century with the popular distinction between the two giants of modern painting, Picasso and Matisse, beyond.

¹⁰ *Perspectiva artificialis* was the name given to the technique of linear perspective developed in the Renaissance that sought to provide a reliable way of constructing images on the two-dimensional surface. It was contrasted with *perspectiva naturalis* or *communis*, 'which sought simply to formulate mathematically the laws of natural vision' (Panofsky, 1991: 35).

¹¹ See, for example, Panofsky (1991).

objects along the x, y, and z axes, relative to the projected vanishing point. The image is configured by offering it to an absolute observer, to a vision that is abstracted from its involvement in the world, a vision that takes place without a body.

In this technique, Descartes discovers a vision of space rendered clear and distinct, denuded of all its latencies and hiddenness, which is to say, space purged of true depth. This is a paradox in appearance only, for as the art of perspective shows, the illusion of depth can be created on the two-dimensional picture-plane in the same way that it is painted on the interior surface of the eye — suggested by way of height and breadth. In this account, depth is, then, nothing real; it is but ‘breadth seen from the side’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 255). The phenomena of encroachment and latency, integral to the perceptual experience of depth, is not for Descartes part of the true definition of bodies, it is simply the confused expression of ‘my incomprehensible solidarity with one of them — my body’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 134). From the picture-window of perspectival drawing, Descartes derives a conception of space reduced to its own simple self-evidence. It is space pictured as a mosaic of parts, spread out side-by-side, *partes extra partes* — it is space identified with extension.

For Descartes, depth does not tell us anything about the world; it is not an attribute of things. Descartes offers us a geometrical space, everywhere identical to itself and indifferent to its contents — a space in which things are no longer those rivals for my vision which can only be seen in a ‘temporal cycle in which each gain [is] also a loss’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 50), but in which objects are spread out and comprehended by an order of thought, a universal power that enables them to be connected. In short, it is space regarded in an instantaneous synthesis, in and from an indifferent now point.

As a consequence of what he takes from the perspectival technique of classical painting, Descartes was able to ‘elevate certain properties of beings into a structure of Being’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 134). It is this elevation that is generative of his metaphysics. We have seen how for classical painting outline — or rather, the form — of an object takes precedence over its colour, and texture, so for Descartes, such ‘sensory qualities’ are reduced to a second order, because they do not directly pertain to the geometrical properties of extension, definitive of the entity as it truly is. Just as images composed using the technique of *perspectiva artificialis* look frozen in time and peaceful, because they present a world which, held beneath a gaze fixed at infinity, ‘remain[s] at a distance and [does] not involve the viewer’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 40), so Descartes conceives of space as it would be seen by [...] a geometer looking over it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 138), projecting a vision of a world in which objects are indifferent to the space they occupy, and space is indifferent to the objects organised within it.

Such a world, reduced to extension, is a world of certainty, a world with which thought can reckon, calculate, over which it can exert mathematical mastery, insofar as it is essentially inert. The Cartesian conception of space is the correlate of a vision that constructs what it sees. It is a vision that sees insofar as it thinks what it sees, and refuses to abandon itself to the actual, ambiguous spectacle offered up to perception. It presents us with a world that thought can know, but to which it remains essentially indifferent because it is uninvolved in it.

Conclusion

Descartes took inspiration from the technique of perspective drawing. Now, for the early Renaissance artists this technique was more than just a ‘tool’ — something that could be called on should the occasion

call for it. Instead, they sought to make this technique into the principal dynamic of all painting. If this technique was held in such high esteem, it was because the artists thought it 'capable in principle of founding an exact construction' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 135) of the external world. For them, *perspectiva artificialis* did not simply augment the practice of painting; it was supposed 'to bring an end to painting's quest and history, to found once and for all an exact and infallible art of painting' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 135). However, as Merleau-Ponty observes, there was a degree of bad-faith in this enthusiasm. As time passed, the painters came to realise 'that no technique of perspective is an exact solution and that there is no projection of the existing world which respects it in all aspects' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 135). What's more, perspective projection was developed along several different paths: 'the Italians took the way of representing the object, but the Northern painters discovered and worked out the formal techniques of *Hochraum*, *Nahraum*, and *Schrägraum*' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 135). What this reveals is that such techniques are more regulative than prescriptive – more the herald of further possibilities for painting than the final and absolute solution to its problems. It is this that Descartes forgets.

Descartes' fateful error, then, was not so much in taking his inspiration from the technique of perspective drawing, but in treating that technique as absolute, as if it offered an unimpeachable insight into the nature of space and vision. We should not see in his derivation of a philosophy from art the weakness that a modern thought that prides itself on its dispassionate objectivity might suspect. Such a suspicion is more Cartesian than it knows, for it is Descartes who sought to found a science that forgets its origin in art, by suppressing the intertwining of thought in sensuous experience. Nor, however, is it a matter of condemning this forgetting; what is important is to reckon with its consequences. By suppressing the intertwining of thought and sensuous experience, the entanglement of *nóēsis* in *aísthēsis*, Descartes is able to found a self that experiences itself as a clear and distinct *a priori*, the ground and possibility of all meaning. But as a result the body itself loses its primary ability and possibility, its *actio in distans*, and it is this ability and possibility that is nothing other than the *ground* of what Descartes mistakenly takes to be an *attribute* of the spontaneity of the mind — its transcendence.

Rather than purge itself of its artistic inclinations, thought must continually embrace art. The meaning *of* art, *of* painting and *of* drawing – and we should understand the genitive in its twofold sense – cannot be understood as a more or less refractory indication of a thought in full possession of itself. Art is not a symbolic form, it does not encode evidences that are already present in the interiority of a consciousness. Rather it is by lending her body to the world that the artist brings its evidences into existence, and illuminates a *meaning in genesis*, for the body as the locus of our transcendence in immanence, our ability to project a space of expressiveness — our corporeal power of securing from and giving sense to the world — is the ground of, and is made manifest in, painting and drawing.



FIGURE 3 VANESSA FIRTH UNTITLED 2018

To consider the meaning of art, then, is to reconceive the relation between thinking and being, the very meaning of meaning itself. It brings us before the ability and possibility of expression that, as grounded in our being-in-the-world preceding the reflective objectification of the world, cannot be reduced to the consequence of an autonomous intellect. It thus reveals the possibility of transcendence as historicity itself, a historicity of expression that is also an expressive historicity, and opens a field of experience in which possibility exceeds actuality.

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