What interests us in these famous analyses is that they make us aware of the fact that any theory of painting is a metaphysics. –Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind

1. Theory of painting: an introduction

Plato claimed that art’s ultimate aim was mimêsis, the literal imitation of reality. Under this view visual art is simply pictorial – it depicts objects, and usually poorly. By the Platonic view each picture is by its nature a diluted image of the object, in the same way that the object is a corrupted copy of its Form. A quasi-Platonic view of art was historically valid until relatively recently. Throughout the renaissance and romantic eras the best paintings were those that emulated how things were or could be objectively, in God’s eyes. And so the great painters of the renaissance studied anatomy, geometry and history.

But with the advent of photography in the 19th century visual art was made to abandon its role as Nature’s mirror. The impressionist movement was the first to associate the painted image with something like the visceral experience of the painter, and later artistic movements exploded this ideal. Cubism, abstract expressionism, and others gave credence to the priority of subjective experience in art’s ontology, and made the painter’s vision and imagination a more legitimate subject of art than the objective world – thereby proposing that experience was more significant than the world of science, or more valid as a prospective object of knowledge.

Visual art’s progression must have impressed Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in the 1961 essay entitled Eye and Mind attempts to establish an analogy between the visual experience of the modern painter and phenomenological philosophy. Eye and Mind is an elliptical and literary work, by turns a critique of the scientific worldview, a meditation on the nature of visual art, and a plea for engaging lived experience more directly – as the painter does, by inhabiting the world that she sees. The work suggests a metaphysical doctrine as well, one that affirms that Being is not essentially grounded in the theoretic ontology of science. Rather, Being is in the experience and judgment of the beings that inhabit the world.

In this paper I outline and expand upon Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of this analogy between
painting and phenomenology. Particularly, I extend Merleau-Ponty’s metaphorical use of painting to include the interpretation of art work, making note of the affinity between an intuitive understanding of what is present in an art work and Merleau-Ponty’s claims about what is present in the world. I mean to argue that Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor lends itself to fruitful exploration of the question of the nature of art itself, and perhaps appropriately omits the place of authorial intentions in the analysis of art. In the concluding section I try to explain some of the limits of this phenomenological notion of interpretation, which I believe mirror in interesting ways certain possible objections to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as a thesis of epistemology. Section 2 describes Merleau-Ponty’s painting/phenomenology analogy and its ontological significance in relation to artistic interpretation; section 3 explains the place of the subject in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and theory of painting; and section 4 outlines Merleau-Ponty’s critique of a scientific metaphysics.

2. The brute fabric: painting and ontology

Consider what happens when several people look at a single painting. Physically, the painting is a flat canvas covered with colored pigments – but that is not really what those viewing it see. The viewers recognize that there are objects that distinguish themselves among the fabric of colors, faces whose arrangements reveal some fact of their owners’ thoughts. The viewers might perceive an emotional mood that warps the rendered objects in a special way, or a message that some juxtaposition of figures suggests. Each viewer might see something entirely different – and yet it would be appropriate to say that what everyone sees they see in the painting. Merleau-Ponty would put it another way, saying that what they see is some aspect of Being – they see the world, which is comprised of objects, faces, moods and messages, and they see it “according to” the painting (164).

What is present to the painting’s viewers (what its viewers interpret) Merleau-Ponty calls a “brute fabric of meaning” (161). The painter draws upon a brute fabric in the world when she renders her experience in a painting. Then the completed painting is quite literally a brute fabric that the viewer draws upon in her interpretation of what is rendered. What relates the thing painted to the viewer (an experience that takes shape in an interpretation) parallels what relates the visceral world to the painter (an experience that takes shape in a painted rendering in which possible interpretations are embedded). The upshot of all these visual and interpretive relations is that, unlike Platonic mimēsis, nothing is lost in the translations.

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between the world, the painter’s experience, the painting, and the viewer’s experience. For Merleau-Ponty the painting’s viewer is no more distant from the thing rendered in the painting than is the painter, by way of her own vision, from the thing she paints. The painting is like a window through which the viewer enters into the open world of the painter’s vision. Merleau-Ponty articulates this immediacy when he claims that “To see is to have at a distance” (166). In the phenomenology of *Eye and Mind* there is no separation between the perception of something and its worldly presence. Thus it is appropriate that when the viewer sees according to the painting, we should attribute the immediacy of vision also to the experience and interpretation of the art work.

This immediate painter-and-world or viewer-and-world relation is consistent with a possible pluralism of interpretations. As two painters in a single environment see that environment differently and proceed to paint two different works, two viewers interpret a single painting in different ways. But as suggested above this plurality is not merely a function of, say, visual apparatuses that filter a uniform world in different ways. A multitude of interpretations are embedded in the world itself, as are the various interpretations of the painting contained in its fabric. Merleau-Ponty writes that “in the flesh of contingency” there are “a structure of the event and a virtue peculiar to the scenario. These do not prevent the plurality of interpretations but in fact are the deepest reason for this plurality” (179). This articulates in an abstract way what was said above – the painting in itself is the reason and ground for all the diffuse interpretations that issue from it. “As for the history of art works,” Merleau-Ponty says, “if they are great, the sense we give to them later on has issued from them. It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light” (Ibid.). Merleau-Ponty refers to this rich plurality as the *fecundity* of the art work (Ibid.). We will return to this concept of *fecundity* (a plurality of embedded interpretation), along with Merleau-Ponty’s art-like ontology in later discussions.

### 3. The annexed subject

The idea that there is an immediacy between the viewer’s interpretation of an art work and the thing it renders that is similar to the proximity between the painter and the thing she paints provides an illuminating entry-point to a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the *subject*. In this conception of art the artist is essentially a vector for the art work. The painting is not shaped at all by the painter’s agency (nothing originates in the painter’s will). Rather, what the painter renders only passes through her, as it becomes crystallized first in her vision, then transferred to the painting, and is then passed on to the viewer.
Drawing on the bodily nature of subjective experience, Merleau-Ponty often emphasizes the continuity of subject and object in phenomenological experience. The subject is immersed in the world of lived experience. “Things are an annex or prolongation of [the body]; they are incrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body” (163). Thus the self that touches other objects is an object that the self can touch, and the physical aspects of being which appear in my vision constitute my inner self. There is no line which could be drawn between an inner self and an outer world – the former is made up of the latter, and in the immediate interpretive act of vision the former brings aspects of the latter into existence. This permeability between seeing and seen, between touching and touched, Merleau-Ponty refers to as blending (163).

Thus, in the blending of subject and object there is no coherent possibility of the artist as the origin of the work of art – the work merely passes through her. In one wonderful passage Merleau-Ponty says of this occurrence, “We speak of ‘inspiration,’ and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted” (167). We literally breathe Being into us and inhale it back outward, altered, into the world. The painter does something similar when she paints through her vision, for she brings Being into herself by the having of seeing and then transfers it in a more stable arrangement to the fabric of the canvas. But this is not meant to ascribe a causal role to the painter – it only articulates the constitutive role of vision. In vision, “it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-into-itself of the visible” (181). These things, it should be noted, are not the objects of science, but the interpreted elements of experience. They are not objects of science’s ontology, but the more immediate objects of the artist’s.

4. A critique of science

The fact that the phenomenologist’s engagement with experience countenances aspects of Being that natural science cannot is one reason Merleau-Ponty and like-minded philosophers advocate for this “painterly” engagement in lieu of a restricted, scientific outlook on the world. Science seems to view the world and lived experience artificially “from above” (160). As a mode of thought it sets itself apart from the world instead of living within it – and in assuming its role as an objective arbiter of truth, it reduces the world to all that is collectible in data, to only that which can be measured instrumentally. It is a mistake, then, to identify the world “by nominal definition, [as] that object x of our operations [...] as if everything that is and has been was meant only to enter the laboratory” (160).
Scientific discourse treats subjective experience as suspect, an illegitimate ground for determining what the world is really like. But epistemologically, phenomenologists point out that scientific thought is only possible as an idealization of initial lived experience. The objects and structures that science is interested in are only arrived at through careful and systematic reflection upon how the world appears. Objects-in-general, forces and magnitudes, are abstracted from the same brute fabric of meaning that the painter engages, but their application to the world can only be enacted after the construction of a formal model. For this reason phenomenology is apt to treat scientific discourse as creating a distance between our experience of the world and the world itself. Merleau-Ponty suggests that even truth-values have no application in the immediate domain of experience, because truth is a theoretical construct posterior to the phenomenal presence. He says of vision: “One can practice it, exercise it, and, so to speak, exist it; yet one can draw nothing from it which deserves to be called true” (176).

By privileging the immediate experiential reality of images over the ex post facto of the scientific object, Merleau-Ponty denies that there is a given or external way the world is that art could make it its task to represent. The artistic medium that Descartes admired most, he tells us, was the copper engraving, because it outlined the object in accordance with its scientific qualities. That is, it presented a picture of the world as neatly and completely carved up prior to the very possibility of a pluralism of interpretation. The scientific model was, for Descartes, more real than the experience that grounded the model. Phenomenology reverses this dynamic. Merleau-Ponty cites Rodin who said: “It is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph is mendacious,” (185). Because a photograph, like a copper engraving, presents a still image of the world reduced to lines and objects, it betrays the immediate reality of experience, which as we know is defined by movements, colors, and a profusion of impressions and open possibilities.

5. The limits of interpretation: a conclusion

We have seen, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and theory of painting provide grounds for a fruitful analogy between phenomenological vision (which generates things from out of the brute fabric of what is present) and the interpretation of art work. This theory of interpretation is consonant with a tenable view of what is significant to an art work – specifically, the art work is what a viewer perceives it as, and its value is determined by the value attributed to it by its viewers. Merleau-Ponty’s pre-scientific ontology aligns itself with this sort of intuitive ontology of an art work – thus, just as what is present in a
painting is what its viewers perceive as present, what is present in the world is what one perceives as present in experience. To conclude, I will briefly illustrate some of the interesting limitations to this ontological perspective, both for a theory of painting and for metaphysics.

The theory of painting that I’ve attributed to Merleau-Ponty and extended to the domain of interpretation presents a problem for those who wish to treat authorial intention as significant to an art work, because there is no author in Merleau-Ponty’s view. Or rather, the author is only the vector of the experience the painting depicts. This is particularly problematic in the consideration of conceptual art which seems to refer in a manner dependent on authorial intentions. For instance, we should say that an interpretation of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* that arises only from a viewer’s experience must miss something very important about the work, and this something depends on the fact that the work refers to a prior object, or an institution of the art world. To recognize all that is present in the work we need not only have an experience of it, but also situate it in a historical context, recognize the object that the author intends that we recognize (in this case, a urinal flipped over to become a fountain), and recognize what the author intended by putting it forth as an art work. This problem extends to conceptual paintings as well, which seem to rely for their power on their referring to themselves as paintings, with all the associations such reference entails. In *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty writes that the transformations of modern painting have been “toward multiplying the system of equivalences, toward severing their adherence to the envelope of things” (182). The envelope of things is what we see from the artificial perspective of science, so this may be an accurate statement about painting’s movement toward abstractions, but it is not clear what Merleau-Ponty should have said about the existence of conceptual art. He may have wished to say that it is not art in the same way that abstract painting is, or at least that it requires a different model of interpretation more analogous to scientific interpretation of experience.

I notice a parallel between this difficulty with regards to the authorial reality of certain art works and the way in which an innocent theory of vision has difficulty accounting for conceptual, scientific, or mathematical experience. Merleau-Ponty is not especially concerned with these epistemological topics in *Eye and Mind*, privileging as he does the painter’s engagement with experience above the scientist’s. But it is worth noting that mathematical knowledge, for example, demands not only the engaged vision of the painter but reflection upon the form of that experience. This is not an objection to Merleau-Ponty but an observation about the limits of what can be “generated” in vision. It is interesting also to note that as the formalist mathematician believes that what is essential to mathematics is not sensible but merely relational or syntactical, it is often the case with conceptual art that reading about the art work and the
author’s intentions has a more profound effect than experiencing or seeing the work firsthand. The experience, perhaps, is redundant to what counts in mathematics, as it is sometimes in the appreciation of conceptual art.

The last parallel problem I will address concerns whether or not there is a correct interpretation of an art work, and likewise whether there is a correct interpretation of experience. It seems that we do often want to say that some interpretations of an art work are more valid than others, and sometimes this is motivated out of respect for authorial intentions and other times it is not. In our engagement with the world one may obviously claim (and I do not think one needs to evoke truth to do so) that one interpretation of experience is more correct than another, or at least more appropriate. A painter, after all, can render her experience inaccurately. One might compare Merleau-Ponty’s thought in this respect to that of the American Pragmatists James and Dewey, who dealt with a similar problem of how to allow pluralistic worldviews without becoming unmoored in a sea of relativism. Part of the solution then was to say that immediate experience was continuous with scientific reflections (which may be pragmatically, rather than realistically true). This move entails that the generation of an object in the painter’s vision is a pre-theoretic scientific positing of that object.

In *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty seems to believe that phenomenology and scientific ontology clash significantly. But perhaps he is open to the possibility that a new approach to science, one which directs its attentions toward the limits of observation, could come to accord with the painterly worldview, for he writes, in one striking passage, that by turning itself towards phenomena, “science’s agile and improvisatory thought will learn to ground itself upon things themselves and upon itself, and will once more become philosophy…” (161).