Sensation as participation in visual art

Clive Cazeaux

Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK
ccazeaux@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Abstract
Can an understanding be formed of how sensory experience might be presented or manipulated in visual art in order to promote a relational concept of the senses, in opposition to the customary, capitalist notion of sensation as a private possession, as a sensory impression that is mine? I ask the question in the light of recent visual art theory and practice which pursue relational, ecological ambitions. As Arnold Berleant, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Grant Kester see it, ecological ambition and artistic form should correspond, but they fail to recognize sensation as a site where the ecological cause can be fought. Jacques Rancière argues for the political force of the senses, but his distribution of the sensible does not address the particularity of sensory experience. I identify the difference between these approaches within recent relational or ecological aesthetics and my position on sensibility, and indicate some of the problems involved in referring to the senses. I set out the concepts that are central to the cultivation of relational sensibility: style, autofiguration, and the mobility of sensory meaning, extrapolated from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Paul Cézanne. They amount to positioning the senses ontologically as movements along lines of conceptual-sensory connection and implication, based on the transfer of meanings created artistically through style and autofiguration.

Keywords: Autofiguration, Cézanne, conceptual-sensory, ecology, ontology, style.
The sense of having

Do we have sensations? Is that area of white of my office wall, as I perceive it, mine? Are the senses impressions which we receive? Karl Marx raises these questions in “Private Property and Communism,” a fragment from his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, written in 1844 when he was in Paris. His response to the questions is unequivocal. The creation of private property by capitalism breaks down fundamental relations into things, and this happens with the senses too: “all the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of all the senses – the sense of having.” Against this view of the senses, Marx argues for their relational nature: a colour, a sound, a texture is not something external to and distinct from us to be claimed, to be made ours, but a relationship in which the perceiver, other perceivers and the world are already engaged. The way in which the world appears to us is determined by the way in which our senses approach it. But the relational nature of the senses is more fundamental than that, according to Marx. Just as vision exists for the eye and sound for the ear, etc., so the objectivity of human sensation is confirmed by the fact that the world, through our labour, our involvement with it, is a human world. “A musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form,” he argues, only come into being “through the existence of their objects, through humanized nature,” where “humanized nature” refers to the ways in which natural materials are worked, shaped, organized and ultimately given meaning through human, social interaction. As such, the senses are always objective in that they are expressions of human, social rootedness in the world, what he terms “species-being.” Once private property is superseded as part of the dialectical progression from capitalism to communism, Marx declares, sensation will cease to be the having of an item (inward and passive) and become instead an expression (outward and active) of participation in species-being.

What I want to explore in this essay is whether an understanding can be formed of how sensory experience might be arranged, presented or manipulated in visual art in order to promote a relational concept of the senses in opposition to the customary, (and
arguably) capitalist notion of sensation as a private possession, as a sensory impression that is mine. This would be a concept of sensory experience that promotes the idea that the senses are a relationship with the world and with other beings. What I sense is not “mine,” is not a possession circumscribed and contained within me, but an encounter, a moment, an expanse, that already stretches out to invite the meanings, values, inclinations and possibilities that come from being in the world among others. As Daniel Dennett observes, “propriety” is a metaphor that is highly active in determining our thoughts about sensory experience. People insist that “I know how it is with me right now,” but this, he thinks, is essentially people wanting “to reaffirm their sense of proprietorship over their own conscious states.” Further, the “seductive step” taken by the same people upon learning that colour is not an intrinsic but a relational property – constituted by a relation between our faculties and the world – is “to cling to intrinsicality… and move it into the subject’s head.” Marx does not have a lot to say about how aesthetic experience might speak of or exhibit its relational nature. Ultimately, in his view, relational sense experience is restored with the arrival of communism. Rather than the relational senses arriving with communism, might it be possible for the generation and manipulation of sensory forms in art in actual fact to assist in the promotion of relationality and sociability?

II

Aesthetics as ecology

I ask the question in the light of recent visual art theory and practice which pursue relational, ecological ambitions. As theories and artworks, they claim to challenge the subject–object or artist–audience division by arguing that works of visual art have the capacity either to affect or to cultivate social, environmental or exchange-based states of being. Four key thinkers in this area are Arnold Berleant, Nicolas Bourriaud, Grant Kester and Jacques Rancière. The direction in which the art–ecology relation runs is different for the four thinkers though. Berleant applies environmental awareness to the ontology of art. Against the aesthetic tradition of viewing the artwork as an isolated object of disinterested reflection, Berleant argues that our environmental awareness can
open up ways of viewing art, leading aesthetic appreciation away from its “well-worn paths” and “encouraging a mutuality of participation in the aesthetic situation that joins both art object and perceiver within a unified domain.” In other words, conceiving of artworks as environments can help us achieve greater, more immersive acquaintance with art.

In contrast, Bourriaud, Kester and Rancière concentrate upon the place of art within the social sphere. Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics urges art to become grit in all forms of institutional practice and knowledge-construction. He draws on Félix Guattari to promote an “ecosophic practice” which denies the independence claimed for art by Greenberg’s formalism, and instead articulates “particular worlds and rare life forms” as subjectivities in a collective, social setting, so as (in Guattari’s words, quoted by Bourriaud) to “inoculate the venom of creative uncertainty and outrageous invention in every field of knowledge.” For Kester, it is the potential of art to generate novelty within institutional practices that is key. He proposes a dialogical aesthetic “to cultivate understanding, mediate exchange, and sustain an ongoing process empathic identification and critical analysis.” Rancière provides a broad, ontological analysis.

For him, aesthetics and politics are intimately linked; they are both facets of what he calls “the distribution of the sensible.” The shape of experience, the way some things are clustered together, and others are kept apart, is attributable to principles of ordering in which we participate. The fact that sensibility is distributed creates a common ground for aesthetics and politics in as much what we think of as the merely or purely aesthetic becomes the form of politics. Aesthetics, for Rancière, is not a self-contained, self-referring domain occupied by pure sensations or disinterested experiences of beauty, but the site in which contests are fought and felt. I shall clarify where my enquiry sits in relation to these studies later.

My enquiry could be construed as “aesthetics as ecology,” where “ecology” is understood as a thesis of ontological interconnectedness, to the effect that (in the words of David Keller and Frank Golley) “the essence or identity of a living thing is an expression of connections and context.” The fact that ecology has become a force in the transformation of nature from an object of capitalist exploitation to “an
environment for the human being as ‘species-being’ is acknowledged by Herbert Marcuse. He even suggests that the relational sensibility given by Marx in “Private Property and Communism” might become a “radical sensibility” that turns the experience of beauty into the release of “nature’s own gratifying forces,” where these natural forces motivate social change away from capitalism. The one example he gives of such a release is the patriarchal construction of “woman” allowing her “to remain closer to her sensibility” so that she has at her disposal a fund of critical and emancipatory possibilities. However, other than a reference to the female personification of liberty — the “bare breasted” woman “holding the flag of the revolution” — in Eugène Delacroix’s painting, *Liberty Leading the People*, which is essentially a symbolic figure, Marcuse does not consider at length art, the senses or aesthetic sensibility.

But the ecological dimension is an important one. Perhaps most significant concept for us within ecology is “belonging.” The word “ecology” is derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “house,” “dwelling place,” “a place where I feel at home,” “a place where I belong.” The ecological aim in this essay is that the notion of “belonging to a world,” as the basis of a metaphysics or philosophy of life, can tackle the deficiencies and inequalities encouraged by a “this is mine, the rest I do not care about” attitude. Yet the concept of “belonging” can be carved up by capitalism into “belongings,” things abstracted from the network of social relations and participation to become personal possessions. People tend to disregard or not to value that which they perceive as being *beyond or external to themselves*, so it could be argued that the concept of “belonging” is instrumental in reinforcing a worldview wherein human beings compartmentalize existence along the lines of what does and does not belong to me.

There is much to be done on the status of the concept of “belonging” in ecology, but this must remain the job of another essay. What I am doing here is raising the theme as a concern for ecology, and as a subject territory that I want to call to the attention of aesthetics. The philosophy of perception typically approaches sensory experience in terms of belonging, and seeks to attribute the content of sensory experience either to the world through a form of direct realism (we experience the world directly through
the senses) or to intermediaries which we receive from the world through a form of indirect realism (the world is relayed to us via sensory impressions or sense data emitted by objects). Subject to much debate between direct and indirect realists is the distinction (introduced by Democritus but formulated in modern philosophy by John Locke)\(^\text{16}\) between primary and secondary sensory qualities: the former include solidity, extension and shape, and are held to belong to their objects, whereas secondary qualities, such as colours, smells and tastes, are the results of powers within objects to produce effects in us. The assertion that sensations belong to the human subject is made more strongly by anti-realist and idealist positions, which maintain that it is the nature of the subject’s cognitive faculties that govern the modes of appearance through which we come to know the world. However, such positions attract the criticism that it is never the world itself which is known but only the subject’s own, internal representations of it.

This essay is the first step in what is a complex enquiry: to establish whether an area of experience that switches from being ascribed to objects, to being ascribed to subjectivity, from being theorized as distinct from thought to being theorized as requiring organization by thought, might “display” properties – I do not want to say “possess properties” given my identification of the significance of belonging – that can address how we conceive of our relationship to others and the world. As a first step, I am not going to reach any conclusions that can form a project, that can define a single, clear mode of practice whereby visual art can promote sensation as participation. Instead, I conduct some ground clearing. I set out the difference between ontological approaches within recent relational or ecological aesthetics and the focus on sensibility conducted here, and identify some of the problems involved in referring to the senses. I spend the greater part of the essay articulating concepts that I think are central to the making and viewing of art where the ambition is to cultivate relational sensibility. These are extrapolated from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Paul Cézanne.\(^\text{17}\)

I shall concentrate upon visual art for three reasons. Firstly, the studies by Berleant, Bourriaud, Kester and Rancière all focus on the visual arts. Secondly, vision is arguably the sense of externality and division, the sense which tells us that the world exists independently of us and that each of its occupants is a separate, free-standing entity.
These points may not seem negative in themselves but if they are exacerbated by broader, social conditions, they can start to make us forget that we are in and part of the world, that every moment of perception is a condition of active engagement. And this is arguably what modernity has done. Cartesian thought, capitalism, and the industrialization of experience have divided fundamental relationships into isolated things, setting subjective experience apart from the objective world. Thus, the visual already carries a political-ontological value that demands resistance from an ecological point of view. Finally, it emerges that to concentrate upon visual art is not to concentrate upon visual art at all, since the visual, on the ontology of the senses developed here, reaches beyond itself to refer to other modalities and other dimensions of being.

III

Focusing on the senses

Of the four contemporary theorists introduced above, Rancière’s focus is the closest to mine, as I shall demonstrate shortly. Although prompted by the interest in ecological aesthetics from Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester, I think my question is different from theirs. All three draw attention to the capacity of art to be environmental, relational or dialogic, as opposed to being thingly, in its form. That is to say, artworks are promoted which take the form of events or locations or meetings, rather than things (paintings, sculptures, photographs, etc.). As already indicated, Berleant’s stance is somewhat different from Bourriaud’s and Kester’s though. Bourriaud and Kester concentrate on artworks which are overtly unconventional or discursive in form, such as events or environments, for example, the artists’ group WochenKlausur who, in their 1994-95 work Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women, invited attorneys, councillors, social workers, and journalists professionally involved in the cases of drug-addicted women to take boat trips together as occasions where they could speak and listen in ways other than the assertive, combative, interest-laden modes they felt compelled to adopt in professional contexts.
In contrast, Berleant formulates an aesthetics of engagement which *could* include traditional art objects. For example, by his lights, a sculpture could become an environment on the understanding that it comes to life through the connections I make as a viewer walking around it and comparing one side with the other. I stress “could” because Berleant does not actually consider applying his aesthetics of engagement to art objects. Instead, for his aesthetics of engagement to apply to sculpture, he requires a change in the form of sculpture, so that it departs objecthood and becomes overtly relational. He announces that his aesthetics of engagement “transforms not only our appreciation of nature but the nature of our appreciation” but rather than considering sculpture as environment, as one might expect, he asserts that sculpture must adapt: “sculpture,” he writes, “provides a clear instance of the adaptability of art to aesthetic engagement” when it “takes the form of earthworks or environments.” So sculpture cannot remain as an object for Berleant. It must surrender its concentrated, thingly form and spread itself out. He corroborates this when he seeks to turn his aesthetics of engagement into a social aesthetics, understood as “an aesthetics of the arts [that] leads us beyond the arts”. It is not painters or sculptors to whom we should turn for socially-directed inspiration, he argues, but artists “who construct environments”, for appreciating an environment or installation requires not just space but also time, the time needed to move through an installation. The spatiotemporal nature of environmental art means it is contiguous with and therefore can guide us in our physical, “social environment”. The glaring error here, of course, is that the appreciation of painting and sculpture also takes time, so painting and sculpture, as appreciated art forms, should also, by Berleant’s logic, inform our social behaviour.

While these three approaches have much to offer in developing different forms of ecological aesthetics, I don’t think they treat the senses as a site for reappraisal. Despite the differences in their approaches, they all identify the ecological potency of art with its form or ontology, with the question of whether an artwork is a lump or a relation. They all agree that ecological or connective interests are better served by dispersed, relational artworks. As they see it, ecological ambition and artistic form should correspond. But an ontological position is overlooked. Following Marx, our being is already relational in virtue of the fact that sensation is something in which we participate. In reasoning that
ambition and form must correspond, Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester fail to recognize sensation as a site where the ecological cause can be fought. I am not contesting the promotion of relational or environmental practice. I am merely pointing out that this leaves intact the commitment to the binary, inner–outer, “what is mine” – “what is not mine” thinking. The ecological aesthetics of Berleant, Bourriaud and Kester look for alternatives to the object but do not challenge the object. From my perspective, objects are already encounters within sensation, and there is the possibility that the ecological ambition of promoting connection and context might be served by attending to objects as tensions between mind and world stretched out within sensation.

Rancière’s thesis, however, is supportive of the idea that the senses have a political, if not ecological, force. The distribution or organization of sensory experience is essentially political, he argues, because sensory experience always has a situation or a world, a setting which requires understanding, and therefore something which is bound up with the discursive processes – argument, agreement, disagreement, etc. – necessary for sustaining its political space. There is a Kantian dimension to this, as he admits. Aesthetics, according to Rancière, is:

> the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.\(^\text{24}\)

To play with the senses is to impinge upon structures that are political. Because they are situated within the structures which delimit spaces and times, visible and invisible, etc., artistic practices, he continues, “are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.”\(^\text{25}\) Sadly, Rancière does not provide any examples of the kind of “aesthetic intervention” in the general “distribution of ways of doing and making” that he has in mind. Examples are given of how \textit{categories or forms} of art in general are tied to political structures, as in the case of the conflict created between the surface in modernist art and the politics inherent in the logic of
representation. The claim here is that surface, as it is pursued and promoted in modernist art, becomes the means by which artists, whose work as representation was customarily judged to be one step removed from political life, are elevated to being producers of great art and, furthermore, art that is brought “into the décor of each and every life” (presumably through reproductions or wallpaper imitations, since contemporary art is not within everyone’s price bracket). But particular surfaces are not considered. The modernist surface functions in Rancière’s ontology as a concept, its political force attributable to the fact that many works, and kinds of work (for Rancière considers the surface of the typeset page as well as modernist painting) enable the emergence of “surface” as a prominent category that can be identified and traced through the aesthetico-political currents of the twentieth century.

But where would the aesthetic experience of someone standing in a gallery before a particular “surface” work by Kazimir Malevich or Mark Rothko or Alan Charlton fit in Rancière’s theory? Or is it the case that such an experience is just an aesthetic experience, that is, it generates meanings or associations purely in formal, visual terms that have no bearing, political or otherwise, beyond the visual? Surely, on Rancière’s terms, such experiences, in that they involve meanings or associations, that is, concepts from a linguistic structure, count as distributions which shake the web of aesthetico-political significance? If not, if they are just aesthetic experiences, then this countermands completely Rancière’s claim that the aesthetic is political. It effectively admits that it is not the sensible at the level of the particular, including all the meanings evoked by it, but the (socially-constructed) linguistic framework organizing the sensible, as in the case of the concept “surface,” whose distribution is the key to his political aesthetics. In another idiom, it is the knowledge that “surface” paintings exist (and I needn’t have seen a single one) rather than sensory acquaintance with any one “surface” painting that counts.

The rub here is the epistemological distinction between universal concept and sensible particular, and the question of whether the two have radically distinct natures whose mode of interaction is deeply problematic. Rancière’s Kantianism suggests the distinction is not problematic for him and that the two terms can intersect in a fashion consistent with and supportive of his “distribution of the sensible” thesis, on the
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grounds that conceptuality and particularity are mutually defining terms, following Kant’s dictum “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” But he does not refer to conceptual–particular mutuality. Furthermore, when his philosophy is taken up by art theory, as in the case of Claire Bishop’s evaluation of Rancière in the context of socially-engaged art practices, the aesthetic remains as a category and not as an encounter with the sensible particularity of an artwork. In opposition to the claim that socially-engaged art functions by rejecting any aesthetic properties, Bishop draws on Rancière to the effect that (in Bishop’s words) “the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains [the] ameliorative promise of a better world to come.” Several works of socially-engaged practice are described, for example, Phil Collins’s two-channel video installation *they shoot horses* (2004), showing nine Palestinian teenagers (paid by Collins) disco-dancing continuously for eight hours in front of a garish pink wall in Ramallah, but no indication is given of how its aesthetic properties deliver on the promise.

There is the problem of reference though. “Sensation” and “the senses” are broad terms. How am I using them? We have already encountered the Kantian thesis that the senses are conceptually organized. For Marx and Rancière, this takes the form of the senses always already being implicated in political or ideological frames of reference. The issue here is: what exactly am I referring to when I talk of “sensation” and “the senses”? Is it possible to be exact when it seems that such terms, rather than denoting a clearly circumscribed region of perception, in fact bring with them already active processes of conceptual or political determination? As Gilbert Ryle observes, we do not have “a ‘neat’ sensation vocabulary.” Ordinarily we refer to sensations in cases when a particular sensation stands out from the general run of experience, as in the cases of pleasures, pains and discomforts. Beyond this, we do not refer to them. We are much more accustomed to referring to things, emotions, and abstract concepts. Quite why this is the case is potentially a very relevant question for this study, since it is ultimately a question of the value and significance we attach to what the senses are or make available or deliver, as well as the question of how they are described.
But I am referring to “the senses” again when the issue is what exactly is covered by the phrase, whether it should be a phrase that so readily gives the impression of things called “the senses,” and whether their value can be described in terms of “deliverables,” items which arrive “at the door,” so to speak, of one’s awareness. There is the question posed in the philosophy of perception of whether or not the senses are dumb, that is to say, whether the information we receive about the world through them is contained in them (in which case, they are said to have representational content) or is external to them and is applied to them through description or interpretation (in which case, they are said to be dumb). For example, Charles Travis extends John Langshaw Austin’s claim that the senses are “silent” (“dumb”) by arguing that the kind of experience conveyed by the senses does not possess the certainty of or “commitment to” a state of affairs that a descriptive sentence does. But what decides “inside” and “outside” here? The “inner–outer” metaphor is redolent of empiricist vocabulary which conceptualizes the senses as channels, with each sense coming to us, in Locke’s words, “by the proper inlets appointed to each sort.” But even to bring this “inner–outer” or “channel” image to the senses is already to exercise conceptual determination.

The scope of the senses, and the extent to which they already include conceptual or political determination, creates some difficult though nonetheless valuable complexities for my study. Scope is a question of belonging, asking whether or not the determination belongs to the senses pure or proper, whatever this may be. This makes progress difficult because I cannot be certain how I am cutting up sensory experience, and threatens to become circular in as much as any attempt to establish the nature of what belongs to pure sensation will also be an act of conceptual determination, including the application of metaphors of purity and propriety. There is also the irony of embarking upon an exploration of the capacity of the senses to promote a relational ontology, only to find that they cannot be individuated because of the already-conceptual and already-political relations in which they are set. But this predicament is also the saving grace for my study. If the senses are already conceptualized and politicized, then it is precisely this conceptualization and politicization that needs to be wrestled with in addressing the promotion of relationality. Any argument, example or reference I introduce will also introduce its own predetermination, and so the ensuing debate will consist of the
exchange between competing conceptual schemes or ideologies. Because of the Kantian nature of the predicament, reasserted (although not necessarily in Kantian terms) by Marx and Rancière, the study can take it as a given that the senses are always, already written, conceptualized, theorized. The focus of the study then is this: is it possible for the senses-as-conceptualized (hereafter “the senses” on the basis that their conceptually- and ideologically-determined nature is acknowledged) to be manipulated within visual art in the interests of promoting a relational nature?

V

Relational sensibility in Merleau-Ponty on Cézanne

To reiterate: “relational sensibility” refers to sensory experience that promotes the awareness that what I am experiencing is an encounter, a moment, an expanse, that stretches out to invite the meanings, values, inclinations and possibilities that come from being in the world among others. Is there a way in which artists can generate visual forms that might cultivate this awareness? As I have indicated, this will not be a question of the form of the artwork, a question of whether it is a painting or an event. Is there instead something that can be made to occur within sensory experience that will suspend alienated, internal–external perception and stimulate a sense of participation? Merleau-Ponty makes a suggestion. He identifies a kind of painting typified by appearances mid-way between representation and abstraction that he sees as revelatory of the embodied nature of human being. Of interest to Merleau-Ponty is the fact that the paintings of Cézanne and Klee can be read to function not as representations but as works whose own internal organization displays the activity of the body in the construction of the works themselves and, beyond that, the organization of the world. Merleau-Ponty takes one of Cézanne’s paintings of Mont St. Victoire as an exemplar:

The painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all ‘autofigurative’. It is a spectacle of something only by being a ‘spectacle of nothing’, by breaking the ‘skin of things’ to show how things
become things, how the world becomes world... The ‘world’s instant’... is still hurled toward us by his painting.\textsuperscript{33}

The “skin of things” is broken in that the dabs of paint sit not as the mere outlines or facets of the represented object but as gestures that are the coming-into-being of the picture, where the picture is a zone of interaction between artist, mountain, canvas, paints, brushes, and ourselves, the viewers. The painting is not a representation before the world but part of the world. It is in this respect that Merleau-Ponty finds the painting of Mont St. Victoire “autofigurative”: it is (a record of) its own coming-into-being (which includes its being viewed by audiences). The phrases in brackets, and the question of whether they should be in brackets, are decisive. In one sense, the painting is a record of Cézanne’s embodied activity, but in another, autofigurative sense, it is not, for it endures as an arrangement of paint on a surface, as a piece of continuously active technology at the centre of the interaction between artist, mountain and audience. The fact that the dabs coalesce to look like a mountain is not an additional feature which has to be explained, in the style of attempts by analytic aesthetics to explain how a picture can correspond to its object, since Cézanne’s arrangement of paint on the canvas, how one brushstroke sits in relation to another, and our perception of it, already constitute the network of relationships that defines what the painting is from the point of view of Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics. The “work” in the latticework of senses, bodily joints, negotiations between space and flat canvas, and colour distribution that defines the appearance of the mountain is already present in the painting not as a thing but as an original and continuously active relationship that extends to include Cézanne and ourselves. It in this respect that the painting is autofigurative and relational, with these concepts being two sides of the same coin. The painting is a technology: the origin of relations – a nexus of paint, surface and environment – that coordinates the embodied behaviour of painter and viewer.

But what makes Cézanne’s painting of Mont St. Victoire a good example of exhibited relational sensibility? One interpretation is that it feels as if the dabs of paint are always prompting me to look elsewhere on the canvas, so that rather than sitting as brushstrokes which exhibit a sense of “this is an accurate depiction of a stretch of
mountainside” or “look closer at the authentic detail these brushstrokes have achieved,” they become forces at work in my experience, directing my gaze, almost taking me over. The painting becomes an activity that I join. I am less inclined to think of it as an isolated, consumable representation, and more inclined to become involved in the movements prompted by the dabs of colour that continuously reinforce one another.

My description of Cézanne’s brushstrokes as “dabs” is significant. On first reading, this might sound disrespectful: “dab” suggests a lack of care, precision or expertise. But in a phenomenological context, it is the brutish, incomplete and almost unconsidered properties of the dab that, I think, are doing much of the work in moving my attention around the painting. It is as if, when I focus on a particular dab, the feeling is that there is not a lot to see in this particular area, and so my attention moves on. One might expect that an artist who wields paint in such a way as to create a sense of “there’s not a lot to see here” is lacking in experience or talent, is someone who does not know how to invest all areas of the canvas with enough detail to capture our attention. But in the present context, the brutish incompleteness is a vital component in a network of prompts, redirections, and motivations that structure a painting as an embodied exchange rather than as a representation.

My appeal to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reading of Cézanne is not a coincidence. A distinctive feature of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger’s as well, is the attention it pays to the formulation of experience in terms that depart from the Cartesian subject–object divide. The principal concept in this regard for Heidegger is his reformulation of human being as Dasein or “being there”: a state of being located in a situation, working with an environmentally-relevant aim or ambition through an interplay of situatedness and directedness that cannot be divided into “subject” and “object.” The comparable attempt by Merleau-Ponty to articulate being in the world is achieved through the body, except the body is not a thing which belongs to the subject, a flesh and bone container for the soul, but a series of jointed negotiations with an environment. The ecological significance of his work on embodiment has been noted by David Abram and Berleant. As Abram observes, the human body Merleau-Ponty writes about
is very different from the body we have been taught to see and even to feel, very different... from that complex machine whose broken parts or stuck systems are diagnosed by our medical doctors and ‘repaired’ by our medical technologies.\textsuperscript{36}

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is that which

enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or places, to insinuate myself in other lives... The body is my very means of entering into relation with all things.\textsuperscript{37}

In this ontological capacity, the body is what Merleau-Ponty terms a “body schema”; a framework whereby consciousness and the world are opened-up for each other.\textsuperscript{38} Not only is it the medium which organizes a coherent sensory picture of the world for us, but also something active and prospective which is able to play this constructive, objective role because it moves around the world and maps it out for us.

A feature of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is the notion that the senses operate within lines and joints of connection and implication between different aspects of being. Take the example of the colour red. “This red,” Merleau-Ponty writes,

is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colours it dominates or which dominate it, that it attracts or that attract it, that it repels or that repel it. In short, it is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and successive. It is a concretion of visibility. It is not an atom.\textsuperscript{39}

The red in front of me is not a pure, simple phenomenon but a differentiated and complex one. The senses, rather than being conceptualized as five individual source channels filling the subject with information from the world, are presented by Merleau-Ponty as modes of interaction that are able to open out a relation between subject and object because they are internally coordinated \textit{with one another}. Just as any coordinate or
triangulation system defines one location in terms of another, so colours, for example, become comprehensible elements in the construction of a world if they cease to be closed states or indescribable qualities presented to an observing and thinking subject, and if they [instead] impinge within me upon a certain general setting through which I come to terms with the world.40

Synaesthetic perception is, therefore, “the rule”:

Sight, it is said, can bring us only colours or lights, and with them forms which are the outlines of colours, and movements which are the patches of colour changing position. But how shall we place transparency or ‘muddy’ colours in the scale?... The brilliance of gold palpably holds out to us its homogeneous composition, and the dull colour of wood its heterogeneous make-up. The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass… In the same way, I hear the hardness and unevenness of cobbles in the rattle of a carriage, and we speak appropriately of a “soft”, “dull”, or “sharp” sound.41

This could be construed merely as the point that instances of joined sensation are learned through association, ideas that are put together over time because experience teaches us that they come together. In other words, the senses are essentially separate but can be related empirically. However, it is the use to which Merleau-Ponty puts this point that is significant. For him, the relational nature of the senses is a basic ontological condition, a condition of the human subject being able to organize any meaningful experience at all. It is precisely the interactions between the senses, he observes, which enable the human subject to open onto and to navigate her way around the world. Colour is not simply colour but, in virtue of being an embodied condition, something which exceeds colour, which exhibits properties that apply to the world at large.
Notes

5 Ibid., 241; emphasis added.
7 Arnold Berleant, The Aesthetics of Environment (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 158. Berleant introduces his “aesthetics of engagement” thesis in Art and Engagement (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). He is more concerned with the depth and quality of aesthetic experience as a form of engagement in its own right, than with the idea that aesthetic experience might be an impetus for wider, social or political involvement. It is not until his 2005 book that he considers “sketch[ing] out the case for a social aesthetics”; Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 147. I return to this in the main text.
9 Grant Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Contemporary Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 118.
11 Rancière, Politics of Aesthetics, 12.
14 Ibid., 259, 261.
15 Ibid., 266.
17 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s doubt,” “Indirect language and the voices of silence,” and “Eye and mind,” all in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press). Paul Crowther uses the term “an ecological theory of art” to refer to the tradition in aesthetics from Kant, through Schiller and Hegel to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Adorno, which holds that the work of art in some way “reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world”; see Paul Crowther, Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 7; original emphasis. Of all the philosophers consulted, Merleau-Ponty does the most to substantiate the concept of embodied inherence underlying Crowther’s ecological theory, as he admits (12). However, Crowther is more interested in extracting an ontology of art, something universal, from Merleau-Ponty’s account of painting, than exploring those elements within art that might promote greater awareness of inherence.


21 Berleant, Aesthetics and Environment, 148.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 149.


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 17.


29 Bishop, ‘The social turn’, 182.


33 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and mind,” 130 and 141.


36 Abram, Spell of the Sensuous, 46.
Sensation as participation

37 Ibid., 47


41 Ibid., 229-30.