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**Merleau-Ponty as the Philosopher of  
Postmodern Art?**

*Maja Murnik, PhD student and Assistant,  
University of Primorska at Koper, Slovenia*

In the last twenty years, the interest for the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has strongly increased. The history of philosophy is used to link him with the branch of the existential phenomenology. He was influenced by the ideas of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. He was Sartre's contemporary and his collaborator (they founded together the journal *Les Temps Modernes*). The focus of his works, published between 1945 and 1961, lies in the problem of perception. Perception became also the central theme of his philosophy, elevated to the existential dimensions. In the connection with perception he developed the concept of body. He considered the human body, called the body-subject, as the seat of perception. The notion of body was developed through explicit criticism of the Cartesian subject as “cogito”.

The increased interest for Merleau-Ponty's thought can be found especially in Anglo-American world which discovered him “freshly” in some way and has begun to be engaged with him. The Anglo-American world partly actualized his philosophy and tied it up to their theories,<sup>1</sup> and at the same time it started to think it in the connection with the shifts of the contemporary art and society (e.g. Amelia Jones, feminism). On the other hand, it seems as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, above all the so-called “late” Merleau-Ponty with the notions of flesh and the chiasmic structure of flesh, anticipates the theorists and philosophers which are widely considered to be linked with the postmodern thought. It looks like Merleau-Ponty has something to say about the contemporary experience of the world. But it is not only this. In aesthetics, Merleau-Ponty has gained the reputation as the philosopher of modernist painting – his most influential essay “Eye and Mind” (1961) is designated as a “climactic philosophical study of modern painting”.<sup>2</sup> However, if we look across these essays, dealing directly with art and aesthetics, we can recognize some moments in his other works that are strongly up-to-date. Even more, these moments seem to be more relevant for the theoretical framework of the reflection on contemporary art in the postmodern age. (Note: they can be found in “Eye and Mind”, too. We just have to look more extensively.) Therefore we should examine especially the notions of body and flesh to find out if they are corresponding to the issues of art in the postmodern era. We would emphasize these moments.

I.

The notion of body is one of the main themes in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and is strongly linked with the notion of perception. The theory of body is in fact the theory of perception. Merleau-Ponty follows these themes from the beginning of his career till his death. According to his relation towards perception, Martin Jay<sup>3</sup> divides his philosophy into two major phases: the first can be defined with the works as *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) and *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). After an intermezzo when Merleau-Ponty was dealing with the contemporary politics and Marxism, he returned to the previous themes and deepened them. In this later phase, the essay on painting "Eye and Mind" and the posthumously published and uncompleted manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* (1961) are of main significance.

His basic philosophical presumption is human's pre-reflective relation towards the world. As human beings we act in the world, not to extra separate between us and the world; the intellect joins later. The cognition of the world takes place through dynamic process of perception – perception is thus the main source of our knowledge about the world. Our experience of the world is integral; visual, tactile etc. experiences are mutually intertwined in the process. It should be emphasized that Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception should not be understood in the sense of a barely physiological annotation with the help of sense organs. In contrary, it is a complex and multi-dimensional relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Although deriving from the sensual experience, the object is not given to the perceiving subject. The subject takes over the object, re-constitutes it and experiences it (also emotionally). To simplify, in the process of reception of stimulus the organism "designs" the proper form of it. It gives it a certain meaning for the organism which then influences on the world back. The circle is closed and endless. Every perception takes place within certain horizon, within the world. This is the form of encounter between an organism and the world, and the respond of an organism is not a consequence of "real" situation outside an organism. In fact, "real" situation does not exist. The world is not in front of us, it is surrounding us, containing us; it is inside us. In this mutuality between us and the world the further development and interest of Merleau-Ponty's thought can be noticed, as well as the moment which can allude to the postmodern understanding. The cognition of the world is not intellectual, in contrary, it is the combination of all our sensual, mobile and emotional capabilities, mutually intertwined.

A human body is called the body-subject. In his earlier texts Merleau-Ponty understands the body as simultaneously physical and psychical, spatial and temporal entity. A human body is a common texture of all meanings and a general instrument of his understanding of himself and the world. It is our means, through which we communicate with the world. A human organizes the perspectives of the world through his body, thus he organizes his knowledge, the systems of meanings. The meanings and the perspectives are passing into each other. Through the endless acts the body-subject seizes the meanings that transcend and also change his natural capabilities in every single moment. He opens himself for the new attitudes and mediates them to the others through inter-subjective relations. The body goes beyond reason and free will. However, it incorporates existence.

In the first phase of Merleau-Ponty's thought the subject still persists in the centre of the world and of his thought. This body-subject is essentially determined by the world and constituted by it and, in reverse, it constitutes the world back, but it is still the point which unites different threads coming from all around. But in his later phase, Merleau-Ponty breaks the remained centralism of such subject which position is still keeping further, in spite of its constituting relation to the world, and he develops it further. He completes its

relation with the world. In later phase, the phenomenology of the earlier Merleau-Ponty is deepened into the ontology. He introduced a new term – flesh that turns out to be an ontological category. He intended this notion to overcome the limitations in his earlier *The Phenomenology of Perception*, concerning our relation to the world and to each other. The term “flesh” remains unclear and vague; Merleau-Ponty describes it as resembling to one of four basic elements. The flesh is a kind of intermediate stuff which is neither material nor spiritual, but it connects us with other objects. Through the flesh our body and the world are coming together and communicate with each other. Or, as Merleau-Ponty writes:

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body.<sup>4</sup>

As we can see from this quotation, in his later phase Merleau-Ponty simultaneously introduces another new notion – the visible and the invisible. The visible is not just something we can coolly perceive; it is defined by the invisible which tends to be the relations with other objects in the world, all our previous encounters with them, possibilities, latencies. The visible is then not a crystallization of an object which could appear in front of us as some pure form. The object is partly revealing for us in a kind of texture which anticipates rhizomatic structures of Gilles Deleuze.

The body which sees becomes at the same time the body which is looked at. The body which touches is touched at the same time. Merleau-Ponty illustrates such metamorphosis of subject into object with the example of touching of the right hand by the left one. The relation is reversed at the same time, the right hand is touching the left one. This reversibility is called chiasm. The term derives from the Greek rhetorical theory (from the letter X). But the reflexivity is asymmetrical, it happens with difference. The chiasmatic criss-crossing of the subject-object, of vision and touch, is flesh. The flesh cannot be embodied without this difference, i.e. without something that remains.

## II.

Now I have emphasized especially those aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that can correspond with “art in the postmodern age”. I would carefully say “art in the postmodern age” instead of “postmodern art” which is a disputable term and will not be discussed here. What I have in mind, are some features of contemporary art which seem to correspond to Merleau-Ponty's concepts, and them I would like to briefly sketch.

At the same time we have to be aware of the fact that some Merleau-Ponty's viewpoints are more conservative. For example, his essays on painting show that he put painting on the top of value,<sup>5</sup> moreover, in “Eye and Mind” he put photography into the subordinate position because photography cannot show the movement, “the overlapping, the ‘metamorphosis’ of time”.<sup>6</sup> However, for Merleau-Ponty, vision is movement. There are also some other views: one is belief that painting can take us closer to truth – we can come to know the world over painting because it returns us to the pre-reflective contact with the world. Painter and painting organize the perceived world in a new way, especially modern painting tears up the conglomeration with the bandage of objects. Merleau-Ponty's modernism can be found especially in his opinion that a painter seeks to organize the world in a new, different way.

However, I will now briefly list some features which link Merleau-Ponty's thought with contemporary art. In recent decades we can witness to the re-discovery and actualization of body. The body became more and more visible in recent art practices and theories – starting from 1960 onwards. This is most obvious in art practices, called Body Art, and in some branches of Bioart. Amelia Jones, American (feminist) art theorist, dealing with Body Art, constitutes the notion of Body Art practices in contrast with modernism, especially modernism, as established by Clement Greenberg as its most influential promoter. In her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) she criticized Kantian disinterestedness in this modernist art discourse. Body Art practices, especially starting from the 60s onwards, destructed such self-contained and autonomous modernist attitude. Amelia Jones claims that they destructed modernist formalism, too, but this opinion is questionable.

According to Amelia Jones, in Body Art, body has become the sign of self. But this self is particular and dispersed; it is made of many contingent selves and experienced as plurality. Such body is criss-crossed with the social and political issues, intertwining in it. Amelia Jones is aware of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, when designing a kind of mapping of theoretical discourse of Body Art. Merleau-Ponty's notion of body-subject as the interface with the world is also found in her emphasize of inter-subjective relations between performing body and audience.<sup>7</sup>

Polona Tratnik, Slovene art theorist, emphasizes some aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy:

A seer and the seen are both interweaved in the flesh of the world, as Merleau-Ponty believed. Everything I see is reachable to my look. /.../ The visible world as well as the world of my intentions are both parts of the same Being. Things interfere with each other.<sup>8</sup>

And also: "Human body does not end with a rind of human organism, with skin, for example. It is expanding into space."<sup>9</sup> From this point of view she points out further some aspects of Merleau-Ponty's notion of body which tend to be applicable for understanding of her practice as Bioartist.<sup>10</sup>

Especially Body Art as a branch of performative arts (and Bioart as well) suggests a feature, also essential for the understanding of contemporary art – i.e. processuality. Work of art is not understood any more as self-contained, fixed object, in contrary, it is dispelling around – spatially and temporarily. Its meanings are emerging in the process of the interactions between its particular parts, stages and times; within reception of art. In such interactivity of much contemporary art the shift of many works of art from the optical extension to the tactile, corporeal can be found, and this is again a feature which can draw them near to Merleau-Ponty's notions. Works of art are transformed into "texts" as (what Roland Barthes wrote for language and literature in his essay "Death of the Author" from 1967) a tissue of quotations, originating from thousand centers of culture, not from one experience. According to Barthes, this plurality is united in a Reader, thus in the point of reception.

Multi-meaningness of such work of art in the postmodern age also means that art has lost its status as autonomous. It is not an isolated esthetic object any more that can be contemplated by distant and objective art critic's eye. It also came to daylight that it is something different from the other discourses. Autonomous fields are disappearing, the borders dividing different discourses are more vague than before. Such decentralization, dispersal means that the meanings are something smooth, which cannot be seized from other discourse, but within different discourses.

With these allusions I intended to emphasize some moments in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, dealing not with art and aesthetics directly, and which can be used as a preliminary sketch for understandings of contemporary art.

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<sup>1</sup> For example Paul Crowther and David Michael Levin.

<sup>2</sup> Galen A. Johnson, "Ontology and Painting: 'Eye and Mind'", in: Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 299–300.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", in: Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, pp. 124–125.

<sup>5</sup> Not only modern painting, although he took examples mainly from it.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> For more about the issue of body in art see also Amelia Jones, "Body", in: Robert S. Nelson, Richard Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 251–266.

<sup>8</sup> Polona Tratnik, "Carne del mundo – Flesh of the world", in: *A mínima*, no. 18, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Polona Tratnik, "Carne del mundo – Flesh of the world", p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> See also Polona Tratnik, "37°C: from the inside of a being to the thin line of life", in: *Leonardo*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2005, pp. 103–108.