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## Embodied Art: A Merleau-Pontian Improvisation of Being in Theater

Katharine Henshaw  
info@ubiquitypress.com

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### Abstract

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Eye & Mind*, lyrically links vision and painting as modes of embodying Being. He powerfully argues that humans are bodies (rather than minds in bodies, or minds and bodies) and that vision is the primary mode of our embodied engagement with the world. He suggests that in painting, the artist re-embodies in paint on canvas that which has been first embodied in the artist's body through his or her sight. This paper suggests that an alternate art form, theater, provides a richer physical arena for the re-embodiment of Being. In live performance, actors, singers, and dancers offer their bodies as canvases, re-creating in voice, movement, time, and space the Being of the performed piece. These living re-creations are then embodied in the audience as they watch, in reciprocal emotion and physical sensation. Editor's Note: Honorable Mention Paper, 17th Annual Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference (2013)

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**Cover Page Footnote**

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**Katharine Henshaw**

*University of California, Riverside*

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## Abstract

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Eye & Mind*, lyrically links vision and painting as modes of embodying Being. He powerfully argues that humans are bodies (rather than minds *in* bodies, or minds *and* bodies) and that vision is the primary mode of our embodied engagement with the world. He suggests that in painting, the artist re-embodies in paint on canvas that which has been first embodied in the artist's body though his or her sight. This paper suggests that an alternate art form, theater, provides a richer physical arena for the re-embodiment of Being. In live performance, actors, singers, and dancers offer their bodies as canvases, re-creating in voice, movement, time, and space the Being of the performed piece. These living re-creations are then embodied in the audience as they watch, in reciprocal emotion and physical sensation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's project in *Eye and Mind* is twofold. One of his main priorities is to urge upon us the awareness that we, as humans, are primarily (and perhaps solely?) bodies. As he conceives humanity, we are embodied beings, living in and amongst "polymorphous Being" itself, in all its forms.<sup>1</sup> We exist in a soup of Existence. Through our bodily senses, the world makes itself known to us; it is by virtue of our bodies that we are immersed in it.<sup>2</sup> Our perceptive "open[ing] onto the world" is direct, immediate, and interactive: we take the world in and we in turn are taken in by the world around us.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Merleau-Ponty underscores vision as a crucial medium by which we perceive and connect to our surroundings.

He sharply contrasts this body-in-world view against a mind-centric Cartesian approach, which gives primacy to mental representations of the world over bodily experience.<sup>4</sup> For the Cartesian, the body is like a picture frame out of which the mind gazes. The objects in the world, perhaps real, perhaps not, are in the mind as images, thoughts, or pictures, as though without substance or solidity.<sup>5</sup> Vision is reduced to light rays and retinas. In this diagrammatic model, 'seeing' is the action of light rays angled to bounce off receptor cells in the eye structure. In modern parlance, the sight of

the world is delivered in discrete packs of sensory data to be decoded as thought, and the processing mind finds itself as distinct from the data-receptive body as is this body from the things that triangulate light. For Merleau-Ponty, this distance is unnecessary and unreal, for “seeing is not a certain mode of thought” but is real-time engagement with existence as it *becomes* in the body. Vision is connection to “the fission of Being”, the ground-zero of what it is to be a creature of the world.<sup>6</sup>

After seriously challenging the Cartesian model, firmly establishing our bodies, and opening up our vision to the things of the world, Merleau-Ponty’s second priority is to demonstrate the ways in which painting is emblematic of the relations between vision, body, and environment.<sup>7</sup> Via the direct access of her eyes with the stuff around her, the painter drinks in the world, or less egotistically, the world pours itself into the painter’s eyes. She soaks it into her body and then doubles it, recreating the work vision did in her body by using her body to paint it out.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the painter-being takes in Being, and then back through her own being, creates: painting makes Being visible.<sup>9</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the categorical distinctions between viewer and what is viewed, between body and world, and between painting and the world, blur.

If vision can work so powerfully in painting to remind us of our bodies in the world, what of art forms that use the whole body’s perception of space and depth and relation? Painting is for the eye what theater is for the body. Where painting, once created, is static, theater continually moves within the “halos of Being.”<sup>10</sup> Theater draws upon the “brute fabric of meaning” in the world, “such as it is in our lives and for our bodies.”<sup>11</sup> It is this raw immediacy that painting composes and which theater exposes.

In its various forms, theater focuses on singular modes of our existence to finely demonstrate the details of Being. The formal elements of space, time, movement, voice, and character exemplify our bodies’ ways in the world, as the formal elements of painting explore the mechanisms of perception.<sup>12</sup> Audiences see the living bodies of the performers in ranges of motion and sound, in reaction to the environment, simultaneously experiencing and expressing. Performers, fully attuned to their physical experience onstage, also sense and respond to those who watch, both fellow performers and spectators. Theater displays the humanness of living bodies, through bodies to bodies, in a symbiosis so tightly woven “that it becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen.”<sup>13</sup>

Performance creates its own discrete spaces in which to exist. Dance stages and theater sets are carefully bounded, worlds within the world. Designers fabricate environments to suit the stories, some realistic, others less so. Objects in these constructed spaces have intention and meaning. There are no accidental furnishings or random props. Each chair or door or teapot confidently claims its place. The spaces of performance are enclosed by a ‘fourth wall,’ an invisible, permeable barrier that tacitly keeps the story

in and the observers out. These bounded, intention-filled spaces function as dioramas of our own lives. We see what it is to be a body, anchored by objects, hemmed in yet exposed. We feel, as if for the first time, the power of environment on mood and the ways in which character and story are expressed in things.

In the same way that spaces are purposefully constructed habitats, stage time is a manipulated quality. Scenes play out as the storyteller imagines them, not as linear time demands it. Past and future are fluid states. Stories jump forward and backward or skip over intervals, crafting a distinct and delineated chronology. The audience, locked in real time, knows more than the characters whose false timeline is fragmented. Watching, we see the end of the story from the beginning, but the characters must live it. Character-time is both broken and fixed; they exist in a loop from which they can never escape. The audience leaves the story there, in the theater, ready to be enacted again, in order to return to their real, unrepeatable lives.

Performed movement, in theater or dance, is both trapped by gravity and liberated from it. The pull of the planet is felt in the effort and force of bodily exertions, and the audience sympathizes with the sweat and power needed to stand erect, much less leap free of the ground. Knowing ourselves to be bricks, tied to the earth beneath, still we long to be free. Dancers bend and fly, sinuously defying every limit of bodily structure and heft. In the extremity of their freedom, performers both encase us in our flesh and make us believe we can be free of it.

Small focused turns of the hand or shrugs of the shoulder remind us that Being is expressed cleanly and simply in the details of muscle and bone. On-stage, the most natural-looking movements are unnatural. Seemingly effortless when they are born in a moment, in performance planned movement requires practice and exquisite poise. What comes easily to living beings is rough work to duplicate on purpose. Though practiced, these exemplified movements exhibit the beauty of our own form. We take away from the performance the belief that our own profile is as eloquent, our own shoulders are as revealing. We realize again the power of our bodies to react and be present in the world.

Voices lifted in song pull us out of our bodies or push us into buried terrain. Loud, they open us to exuberance and possibility; muted, they open sensual interior spaces. Through voice, each audience member is linked to the life expressed through the tones of the singer's body. We ride the emotions of sound. Vocally, we can be both animal and human; we can explore the pre-lingual as well as the highly articulate. The breath of the performer, held, controlled, and released, is an audible reminder of the breath of life within us all. This same atmosphere that I exhale produces in the opera singer an exquisite soprano and in the silent mime a frustrated whoosh of air. The essential function of Being, respiration, becomes the medium for its symbolic expression.

The painter soaks in the world and re-embodies it in paint, but the performers' have only their bodies to function as both sponge and canvas. For the actor, the building up of a character involves embodying some other inner life. Just as the people we know are more than a list of the words they utter, so too characters are more than lines in a script. They have voices and hands and feet. They need, they want, they love. Actors willingly subsume their selves into the character, giving their own limbs and tongues to allow these written creations to become. Characters never before alive, now live. This sacrificial miracle allows the watching audience to vicariously experience what the actors bring to life in their own bodies. Through the characters, both actors and audiences are doubly alive.

Among and through all these discretely fabricated elements, performers onstage are beings exhibiting Being, their exhibitions received, absorbed and reflected by the beings that watch them. In Merleau-Ponty-speak, we "haunt" each other.<sup>14</sup> Observing, we become intimate with "elements drawn from the body" of the performer: we see ourselves in their flesh as in a mirror and are reminded of who and what we are.<sup>15</sup> Theater, by focusing in on the small, by boxing off bits of time or space, by breaking the normal bounds of movement and sound, calls attention to the ways in which bodies are awash with perception. In objects and orientations to space, in the giving and taking between people, in the slip of muscles and the curl of song, the world impinges on the life of the body. And the miraculous body, constantly absorbing and adapting, gives back out to the world a new interpretation of existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," originally published in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.) Revised by Michael Smith in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.) This text will be cited throughout the notes as 'Eye' and page number. A note on the term 'Being': Merleau-Ponty indicates, without ever technically defining, a nearly mystical sense, mode or state of existence encompassing all existence which he capitalizes as 'Being.' The strength of this indicating is that it allows his meaning of Being to be absorbed through the experience of his prose and internalized by the reader. I have followed his example in letting Being speak for itself.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 4, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7. The entire paragraph here is an explication of MP's discussion of Descartes.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7.