

# Painting, Abstraction, Metaphysics: Merleau-Ponty and the "Invisible"

PAUL CROWTHER, *International University Bremen*

For centuries painting and sculpture were justified as fine arts on the basis of their relation to ideal beauty. By embodying the ideal, visual art could claim to be on a par with, say, poetry and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> From the eighteenth century onwards, however (and most notably in the work of Lessing and Hegel), attempts were made to establish the special significance of pictorial representation on the basis of its own distinctive metaphysical structure. This is based on picturing as an art of *spatial* realization, where, in order to understand what is being represented, we do not need to scan the work's parts in a specific chronological order. With literature and music, by contrast, we have arts of *temporal realization*. Here the recognition of meaning is dependent on comprehending specific parts in an exact temporal order.

From this basic contrast, many interesting effects arise, most notably the fact that what pictures represent is oriented toward a single scene or moment of action, whereas literary narrative can encompass action spanning unlimited periods of time. This difference, however, leaves several, more specific, issues relatively open. On the one hand, while it allows the identification of distinctive characteristics of pictorial and sculptural representation, it does not clarify what is distinctive to painting per se as an art form. On the other hand, its approach to the visual arts is very much from the spectator's viewpoint. This leaves open the possibility of further areas of significance to painting which mediate the separation of subject and object of experience in distinctive ways.

These possibilities of investigation have not been adequately developed. In recent years the influence of poststructuralism has led the project to be shifted aside in favor of an approach to painting that emphasizes its status as visual text. This approach in effect *reduces* visual idioms to the model of written discourse. They are seen as "sites" where meaning is "produced" for communicative and persuasive purposes on the basis of race, class, or gender interests.

There is an astonishing irony here. For to understand painting on these terms is to reduce it to a model based on Western conceptions of instrumental reason. Indeed, it is an exemplar of a kind of academic consumerist mentality through its marginalization of the act of making in favor of the consumption of meaning. Through this, the distinctive visuality and effects of painting are at best distorted, and at worst (and more usually) concealed.

If, therefore, we seek an adequate account of the distinctiveness of painting, we must start from an approach that focuses on its visual ontology. This seeks to understand not only what painting presents, *but also what it*

*does*, i.e., its status as a mode of *forming* the visual world. In order to be complete, the approach must also accommodate the specific distinctiveness of abstract painting.

These factors can be usefully developed by reference to the late work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His is one of the few philosophies of visual art that gives due emphasis to painting's formative power. In this paper I will first interpret and develop his theory of painting and will then extend it further, so as to formulate a theory of meaning for abstract art. I shall conclude with a brief consideration of the conditions under which painting in general attains the status of art.<sup>2</sup>

The most complete exposition of Merleau-Ponty's view is found in his last published work, "Eye and Mind" of 1961.<sup>3</sup> In it he claims that "Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the 'there is' which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine."<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty's point here is that the body, rather than abstract scientific or cybernetic models, is the basis of our most fundamental cognitive orientation toward the world. Painting, indeed, is able to draw upon and express this "fabric of brute meaning" in a way that other art forms and modes of symbolic expression and analysis cannot (*PP*, 161).

To understand why, we need to look in more detail at this level of "brute meaning." In relation to it, Merleau-Ponty observes that,

... visible and mobile, my body is a thing amongst things; 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 round itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body (*PP*, 163).

Merleau-Ponty is emphasizing not merely the shared physicality of the body and the world, but how they define one another's character. His approach here might be explained and further developed as follows. The shape, size, position, and perceptual characteristics of physical things are not absolute, but are correlated with the size and perceptual abilities of the particular kinds of creature that apprehends them.

In this context the mobility of the body is of paramount significance, most especially in the way in which it grounds the perceptual process in *depth*—which Merleau-Ponty describes as "having at a distance." The visual

field, for example, is not a passively registered set of data. Rather, the juxtaposition and overlap of objects is mapped out by my own immediate position in relation to them, by the positions that I could take up, and by the ways in which I could act upon them, and other factors besides. Each visible item is positioned within a space of possibility determined by what the body can do, as well as being defined by its relation to, and contrast with, other visual items. Nothing is, in perceptual terms, simply there. We recognize a visible item or state of affairs on the basis of its position within the complex network of competences and relations just described. Perception is, in every sense, "having at a distance."

There are two other features of our embodied inherence in the world which need to be emphasized. First, Merleau-Ponty notes that "[t]here is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place—when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible..." (*PP*, 163). The point here is that the human subject is embodied, which means that, as well as sensing others, it knows that it is an object of sense for these others (a fact, one assumes, of which other animal life-forms are not as distinctly aware). To be able to conceive of oneself in these terms as an object means that one is able to imagine oneself occupying positions in space and time that are different from the ones one presently occupies. The present position is given its distinctive character through being (at least) tacitly contextualized in relation to this horizon of alternative positioning.

From these complex factors, it is clear that the embodied subject's perceptual relation to the world is, in large part, interpretative and creative. How it focuses attention on the visual field, which aspects it scrutinizes, which aspects it overlooks, will be a function of its perceptual history, of different positionings, and reflection upon that history, as well as upon general factors inherent in the human mode of embodiment.

There is a decisive network of reciprocal relationships involved here. These all converge upon the fact that just as the sensible configuration of the world is given its character by human embodiment and personal history, so too, that mode of embodiment and its particular history is called forth by the demands of a re-encounterable sensible world. This world cannot be arrested and, as it were, fixed or used up, in any one perception or sequence of perceptions. It engages the embodied subject in a profoundly intimate pattern of exchanges. Our perception of things is selective and stylized such that the object of attention is powerfully contextualized by all the various experiential perspectives and history that inform our compre-

hension of it. Our response, therefore, involves a *characterization* of the object. Hence Merleau-Ponty's observation:

Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn't these in their turn give rise to some visible shape in which anyone else would recognize those motifs which support his own inspection of the world. Thus there appears a visible of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first (*PP*, 164).

Here we have the origins of the picture and painting. The "carnal essence" referred to is not a faded copy of the world, but rather a gathering up and concentrating of the visible. Indeed, it is possible to argue from this that through such gathering up, the visible comes to exist in a more complete sense.

This can be shown in a number of ways. First, as we have seen, the selective and stylized dimension of perception means that what we perceive always has a strong subjective loading. The image exemplifies this loading and, if transformed into a painting, allows it to become visible to vision itself through the artist's style. Second, the pictorial image is able to address that texture and tapestry of visual relations which are constitutive of how particular items appear to us, but which are not usually noticed, insofar as we are usually preoccupied with what kind of thing a given item is, or with questions of its practical utility. As Merleau-Ponty says in relation to the painter's task,

Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, colour, all the objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only virtual existence. In fact, they exist only at the threshold of profane vision; they are not seen by everyone. The painter's gaze asks them what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be this thing, what they do to compose this worldly talisman and to make us see the visible (*PP*, 166).

On these terms, then, the painter identifies, preserves, and displays the network of visual relations that constitutes the immediate appearance of items or states of affairs, but which is generally overlooked in favor of the mere act of its recognition or practical utility. It should also be emphasized (although Merleau-Ponty himself does not) that the means of this visual disclosure—namely, the gesture involved in inscribing or placing marks on a surface—is itself a mode of bodily orientation. Just as our visual perception

is made possible by bodily orientation, painting thematizes this necessary role of the body, through our knowledge that the painting is something that has been brought forth through the bodily activity and positioning of its creator. (I shall return to this point later.)

Given this analysis, we must now ask about the status of modes of representation that are related to, but not identical with, figurative painting, such as, on the one hand, drawing, and, on the other hand, abstract painting. As it happens, Merleau-Ponty's theory can accommodate both. In relation to drawing, it might seem that, through being oriented toward line, shape, mass, and position, it has a privileged relation to primary properties, i.e., those factors that are centrally involved in space occupancy, and hence which are central to vision. Earlier, we noted Merleau-Ponty's point that scientific models look on "from above" and only mark out those vectors or dimensions of depth that are amenable to manipulation or description. Primary properties articulate *this* level. However, the full complexity of spatial depth is much more than what is amenable to such manipulation, or indeed scientific or verbal description. Drawing therefore has no privileged position and must be understood within a broader theory of painting, for painting addresses primary properties and much more.

In the case of figurative painting, this "much more" involves (to summarize my position) reciprocal metaphysical disclosure. On the one hand, it reveals how its represented subject matter comes to be seen and stylized in visual terms through the artist's bodily positioning; and, on the other hand, this revelation is made possible by the painting's auto-disclosure as this specific work, composed from this unique configuration of gestures. Through painting, the virtual and the physical, the world and the body, are shown to inhabit one another simultaneously and inseparably.

It is, of course, possible to describe this fundamental relation in philosophical terms, but uniquely, painting's formation of visual space exemplifies it at the level of sense perception itself. Other visual media, such as photography and sculpture, also move in this direction but lack the gestural dimension that exemplifies the visible as something which is in part configured through the embodied subject's positioning. In the case of photography, for example, the image places more emphasis upon the visual singularity of the represented content rather than on the artist's positioning. In the case of sculpture, the emphasis is on the transformation of gesture rather than on its role in perception. It should be emphasized, of course, that the differences that I am schematically indicating here are not of hierarchical import. Painting has a different ontological structure from the other visual media, just as they do from it. This means that each medium

has a distinctive visuality which discloses the world in equally distinctive ways.

We are thus led to the major issue which has yet to be resolved—namely, the special visual structure and metaphysical significance of abstract painting. Given that abstraction has no immediately apparent virtual or figurative content, it is clear that it requires a different analysis from that already offered. The question arises, then, of how one might interpret abstract idioms in terms of the “invisible.” In respect of this, Merleau-Ponty suggests that modern painting has been directed toward “multiplying the systems of equivalences, toward severing their adherence to the envelope of things” (*PP*, 182). He does not, however, significantly develop these cryptic insights. I will now undertake such a development.

Arthur Danto and others have insisted that in order to distinguish artworks from real things on conceptual grounds we must take artworks to have semantic properties over and above their physical presence. I would argue that in the case of abstract painting, the nature of these properties can and must be made more specific. They involve factors wherein the visual aspect of the work is a necessary part of its meaning. If, in contrast, the work is merely taken to illustrate some general idea about art, then this means that its status as this particular painting is redundant. There are no clear grounds for distinguishing it from merely indirect theory about art.

In order to avoid this logical difficulty, therefore, we must look for an appropriate theory of visual meaning. An important clue is the fact that, in order for us to recognize abstract works as staking a claim to artistic status, they must follow the presentational or display formats of figurative art. This means that we will look to see what, in visual terms, they represent. There is a *presumption of virtuality*<sup>5</sup> in relation to abstract painting, which means that it is taken to be about some visually significant item or state of affairs other than itself. Before analyzing this further, however, I will first consider a couple of factors that might seem to overturn the presumption of virtuality at the very outset.

The first of these centers on minimal idioms in work by artists such as Yves Klein and Agnes Grey. Here we are presented with rigid monochrome or virtually blank canvases. Surely, the presumption of virtuality cannot get a purchase here insofar as there is, literally, nothing represented in such works. However, against this, we must note that absence, emptiness, and desolation can all be expressed in visual terms, and that to encounter the “empty” canvas in a frame or other display context invites its emptiness to be interpreted on just such visual terms. Even if the artist intends no meaning beyond that which constitutes the work’s bare visual presence, the conventions of presentation and reception, of themselves, serve to develop

its broader significance in associational directions. In the abstract painting there are no virtually inert or neutral properties. (I shall return to this and related points later.)

A second objection to the presumption of virtuality might be made on rigidly formalist grounds. An interpretive orientation that focused exclusively on relations of line, shape, color, mass, and texture as such would be doing no more than explore two-dimensional aspects of the visible. In such cases no presumption of virtuality need be operative.

In response to this, it should be emphasized that even formal analyses are profoundly informed by the presumption. Formal qualities are not recognized through the mere description of spatial relations in quantitative terms. Their understanding involves, rather, the comprehension of relations that converge upon qualitative organic unity.

Two virtual factors are involved in this. First, it is hard to escape the use of metaphors (thus virtual content) in relation to formal description; one talks of “violent” shapes, “heavy” lines, and the like. Indeed, insofar as all painting is a product of gesture, this links created formal qualities to the criteria whereby we ascribe psychological states that allow of gestural expression (such as agitation, calmness, sadness, exuberance, and so on). If, for example, we wanted evidence of how a person felt, the organization of form in painting by him or her could be cited among the relevant criteria. This does not mean, of course, that one can simply read how an artist felt by looking at such formal configurations. It may be, indeed, that an artist produces a work that *looks* agitated but that does not reflect the major states of mind which he or she *actually* experienced during the process of creation. The point is rather that as a product of bodily gesture, painting will have continuity with some of the correlations made between such gestures and psychological states. It will give virtual expression to such correlations in ways that the artist can exploit, or sometimes indeed in ways of which he or she is not immediately aware.

There is a second virtual aspect that *necessarily* determines formal qualities, and which, in extremely complex ways, is fundamental to the emergence of both the gestural significance just described and all the other aspects of abstract painting’s virtual dimension. It centers on the fact that abstract works have intrinsic properties of optical illusion—and hence virtuality—of which any comprehensive notion of formal unity must take account. The far-reaching significance of such illusion will now be explained.

A decisive factor is the figure/ground relation. This basic structure is the minimum condition for perception, though it can, of course, sometimes be instantiated in the most complex ways. Similar considerations hold in relation to pictorial representation. To be a picture in the minimal sense just is to

articulate a virtual, three-dimensional figure in relation to a virtual two-dimensional plane. The more such figures are multiplied and linked into coherent pictorial syntaxes (such as perspective), the more they can exemplify the figure/ground relation in its more complex articulations.

Abstract painting also takes us in this same direction. Properties of color and shape have intrinsic ranges of optical illusion—suggestive of depth relations, and even motion—when placed upon or inscribed in a plane. Even a single line or dab of color upon such a plane appears to cut into it or to emerge from it, depending on the character of the specific line or dab. In the case of those minimal idioms noted earlier, the figure of emptiness, absence, or whatever emerges from a ground comprised by the physical edge of the work.

Most abstract works, of course, develop these basic relations in very complex ways. They create a virtual space, but one where, as Merleau-Ponty would say, new “systems of equivalences” are opened up. The figure/ground relation is the basis of these equivalences, and allows some continuity between the familiar perceptual world and the virtual space of abstract painting. At the same time, of course, such virtual spaces can also *seem* unfamiliar, so much so that the term “non-objective” is often used in relation to them.

It is my contention that this term is inappropriate. The problem of meaning in abstract painting, indeed, has been radically misunderstood. Optical illusion is encountered in many contexts, but to encounter it in the context of abstract art is to do so in a context where the presumption of virtuality leads it to be read in associational terms rather than as mere illusion. To be read in such terms means that abstract painting’s shapes, colors, lines, textures, and volumes are viewed as possible visual modes of three- and two-dimensional space occupancy. The work is an *image* of such possibilities. The question is, however, what *are* these possible modes of space occupancy? What kinds of items and relations could optical illusion be taken to *represent*? The answer to this has already been partially indicated through the link between formal relations, virtual properties, and correlated states of mind. This, however, needs to be radically extended in other directions.

In this respect, let us recall Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “invisible,” i.e., that network of visual relations that is constitutive of an item’s or state of affairs’ appearance, but that is customarily overlooked. To this dimension of the invisible we must also add a further, *latent* one. Given a three-dimensional item in our visual field what makes it “possible” is not only the fabric of immediate, invisible relations but also its hidden aspects, or its possible transformations or relocations, and indeed its relation to things

beyond the immediate visual field. The visual field is massively informed by this latent dimension of hidden aspects and possibilities. Such latency forms a logical space that makes the immediately visible world intelligible to us *qua* visual.

If we wish to characterize this latent aspect of the Merleau-Pontian “invisible” it can be done by asking what, in the most general sense, is its conceptual basis. This is not an empirical question, but rather one that demands we identify the factors that give intelligibility to the very notion of a latent dimension to the “invisible.”

There are six factors here which jointly define the logical scope of such latency: (1) accidental correspondences or associations where a formal configuration looks like a recognizable, visible form other than itself (e.g., when we see shapes in clouds); (2) visual forms suggestive of the gestural correlates of particular kinds of states of mind; (3) items, relations, or states of affairs which are unavailable to visual perception under normal circumstances, e.g., small or microscopic surface features, internal states, highly evanescent atmospheric effects, and unusual perceptual perspectives; (4) possible visible items, relations, or states of affairs which might exist in alternative physical and perceptual environments to our usual one; (5) visual configurations arising from the destruction, deconstruction, reduction, reconstruction, or variation of familiar items, relations, or states of affairs; (6) visual traces or suggestions of past, future, or counterfactual items or states of affairs. In talking, therefore, about things not given in the immediate visual field but which contextualize its full appearance, these six points map out the logical scope of such contextualization. Indeed, one might call this latent field of invisibility “*contextual space*.” It is a space that subtends and gives character and meaning to the immediate visual field. Without it, indeed, that field would be no more than an inert screen of visual relations.

We now reach a decisive point. Any abstract painting opens up a virtual space. If this space does not consist of familiar visual items then its optical properties must be referred to some aspect of the contextual space just outlined. If they are not so referred, the work amounts to no more than a neutral formal configuration. However, as I argued earlier, the presumption of virtuality, which accompanies the conventions whereby abstract works are presented, does not allow for such neutrality. Indeed, if form is to be significant, and if it is to have deep expressive power over and above being merely decorative, then we can only explain this through the evocation of some aspect of contextual space.

Against this claim, the following problems might be raised. Surely we cannot say that a work “must” allude to some aspect of contextual space. It may be, for example, that what is intended is something that is not itself

visual (e.g., "inner states" of feeling or other "dimensions" of reality). Even more important, the allusion to contextual space surely cannot be established unless there is evidence that such meaning is intended by the artist. This, of course, involves reference to sources external to the work itself (such as manifestoes or other writings).

In relation to both these points we must emphasize first that art, in whatever form, is primarily a social, and only secondarily a private, activity. Hence, if an artist wishes to represent some non-visual meaning through a visible configuration he or she must utilize idioms that draw upon a shared visual cultural stock with an associational range which encompasses the intended sorts of non-visual meaning. This, of course, is precisely what contextual space provides. In the case of states of feeling, indeed (as we saw earlier), while their visceral components may be purely psychological, their behavioral criteria often encompass the visible dimension. We ascribe such and such a state of mind on the basis of how people look, and the things that they choose and do in relation to social and other visual environments. These criteria enable that correlation of visual form and appropriate states of mind which is level (2) of contextual space.

The general relevance of the artist's intentions in abstract painting must also be thought through on the basis of art as a social practice. It is possible, for example, that a painter may create a serene and tranquil looking work that generally suggests, say, a lunar landscape, but never actually thinks of the latter association, and actually intends the serene appearance of the work as a bitterly *ironic* comment on the misery of all existence. If this work is created so as to be viewed by an audience other than the artist, then it is self-defeating. Objectively, the work is tranquil looking, and can thereby be regarded as referring to an appropriate aspect of contextual space. The suggestion of a lunar landscape, even if not noticed by the artist, is also a "valid" association as long as it is visually consistent (however loosely) with familiar visualizations of lunar landscapes of a tranquil kind. If an abstract work is created as part of a social practice, therefore, we have no alternative but to read it in terms of those conventions—such as the presumption of virtuality—that make it socially intelligible. Of course, what gives this presumption substance is the fact that we can underwrite it with the notion of contextual space, rather than mere chance association.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that all the great abstract or (as in the cases of Cubism and Italian Futurism) *abstracting* tendencies clearly connect with the different levels of contextual space in both visual terms and (where relevant) in their theoretical manifestoes. In the case of Cubism, for example, this centers on a closing up of the divide between the medium of

painting and its subject matter, so as to reconstruct the latter's plastic substance in a way that harmonizes with the fundamental two-dimensional structure of the picture plane. In the case of Italian Futurism, artists devise linear conventions which are powerfully suggestive of the subject matter's previous positions in time and space. What is notable about these two tendencies is that the effects just described are derived in fundamentally descriptive terms, i.e., by attending to the work's appearance rather than secondary documentation concerning the artist's intentions.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that the connection with contextual space is not as exact as the convention of resemblance on which normal pictorial representation is founded. There is more openness involved, i.e., the work's meaning can range over more than one level of contextual space. This actually invests the work with a *positive ambiguity*. For it means that the work *alludes to*, rather than depicts, its subject matter. Contextual space defines the range of possible virtual "subject matter" here, but which exact aspect of contextual space is relevant to a particular work is only suggested by the work.

One can, of course, pin this down more exactly by reference to the artist's writings. In so doing, however, something is genuinely lost. For it is abstraction's allusiveness that gives it a specially distinctive evocative power which is congruent with the complexity of contextual space. This space is familiar enough to give us a general immediate orientation to such works—even if we have not explicitly formulated that space's general structure. (This is also true, of course, of our general visual orientation. The visual field is only intelligible by virtue of contextual space, but we do not need a systematic theory of such space in order to operate within the visual field.)

The abstract work, accordingly, is able to function between the contextual basis of the visually familiar and its own open—but by no means arbitrary—expression of it. This is its distinctive quality. It is, in this respect, a poignant emblem of both the complexity of our inherence in and open transcendence toward the visible world.

I have argued, then, that like pictorial painting, abstract works address the formative powers of visual appearance, i.e., those factors such as line, shape, color, mass, texture, and volume which are constitutive of the visible as such. However, whereas figurative idioms explore these formative powers at the level of resemblance to the normally "invisible" aspects (in the sense noted earlier) of ordinarily perceived visual items and states of affairs, abstract painting and abstracting tendencies have a different orientation. Their optical properties facilitate allusion to contextual space—a realm that is constitutive of visual possibility and without which visual perception would be unintelligible.

Having developed and extended Merleau-Ponty's approach to painting, one arrives at the following conclusion. Painting in all its forms discloses the nature of things and states of affairs *becoming visible*. In particular, it expresses the fact that the perceptual world is not a static, definitively presented reality, but is one that exceeds total comprehension while nevertheless being basically intelligible through specific forms of bodily orientation. In Merleau-Ponty's words, painting

... gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a 'muscular sense' in order to possess the voluminosity of the world. This voracious vision, reaching beyond the discrete 'visual givens' opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or caesurae (*PP*, 166).

The key point, then, is that because of its autographic character as a spatially realized virtual reality, painting discloses the nature of becoming-visible at the same ontological level at which that becoming occurs. The written word cannot do this.

On these terms, then, painting has its own intrinsic fascination. But we must end by asking a question that Merleau-Ponty does not—namely, under what conditions does painting become an object of such fascination? When does it, to use Merleau-Ponty's parlance, become "autofigurative"? I have sought to answer this question at length elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> In order for a painting to engage an audience in terms of its intrinsic fascination, it must transcend any immediate practical or decorative function. This means that it must differ in comparative terms from other paintings which are merely consumed by such mundane functions. This condition may be satisfied in a subjective sense by being different from, or in some way an improvement upon, other paintings we have seen. However, there is also a more objective aspect to this. It occurs when we can interpret a work as having extended the scope of painting through its historical innovations or refinements in relation to the logical structure of the medium. Such originality, or "effective history," opens out the basic metaphysical trajectory of painting into the diachronic dimension. Painting opens up new possibilities of disclosing the visible, by virtue of the historical development of its own logical scope.

There is a further way in which the metaphysical dimension of painting emerges from this. It can be illustrated by means of a contrast. It is possible (as in the present discussion) to consider painting's metaphysical depth in primarily intellectual terms. However, with the historical mediation just described metaphysical depth can also figure as a major element in *aesthetic* responses. There is, of course, a basic kind of aesthetic experience that

involves the appreciation of formal properties for their own sake, and it is possible to enjoy painting in these terms. However, such appreciation is limited, and does no justice to the artwork's status as a product of human artifice. Other, more sophisticated, forms of aesthetic response do take account of this, and it is here that metaphysical depth can play a key role.

In such cases, knowledge of the painting *as something created* facilitates an empathic enjoyment of the way in which the artist's individual style not only illuminates the metaphysical aspect but does so *through manifesting it as an expression of his or her own sense of the visible*.<sup>8</sup> We can identify with and learn from this *particular* way of manifesting visual appearance or aspects of contextual space. What is decisive is that we appreciate such factors at the level of immediate sensible particularity, and in terms of their particularity. Through such aesthetic disclosure metaphysical depth emerges as a criterion of personal as well as philosophical truth.

p.crowther@iu-bremen.de

## Notes

1. For a useful discussion of these issues, see Paul Duro, "Academic Theory, 1550–1800" in *A Companion to Art Theory*, eds. P. Smith and C. Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).
2. I have also discussed Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art in Chapter 2 of my book, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), and in Chapter 6 of my *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
3. Other central texts include "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" in *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), and "Cezanne's Doubt" in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
4. Included in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 160. Hereafter cited internally as *PP*.
5. I discuss this notion in Chapter 5 of my book, *The Transhistorical Image: Philosophizing Art and Its History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). The chapter offers an extended analysis of meaning in abstract works.

6. This focuses on the notion of "iterability," which is a central theme in my book, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

7. See Chapter 4 of *The Transhistorical Image*.

8. I explore this aesthetic notion of empathy throughout *Art and Embodiment*.