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Contributors: John B. Brough, Steven Crowell, Béatrice Han-Pile, Sean Dorrance Kelly, Jeff Malpas, Wayne Martin, Joseph D. Parry, Violetta L. Waibel, and Mark Wrathall.

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ART AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Edited by
Joseph D. Parry

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PERMISSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Joseph D. Parry and Mark Wrathall

The overarching aim of this book is to demonstrate not just what art can mean to philosophy, but also what it means *as* philosophy. Artists, of course, do not have to be philosophers to be good artists, or bad ones, for that matter, and it is not the general argument of this book that art is philosophy when or because artists deliberately use their work to make philosophical arguments. Indeed, that would seem a sure-fire recipe for making bad art. We do believe, however, that what art *does* is philosophically significant. Each chapter in this book is both an argument for and a demonstration of art's power to aid and inform philosophy. Our approach to art is to treat it as a kind of phenomenology—which is not to say that art can be reduced to a discursive content, but rather that art can function as a way of directing us to important phenomena and helping us to understand them in their own terms. In fact, we deliberately chose to approach this topic with a multiple-authored, "edited" volume. We felt that the best way to make the case for art as phenomenology was to show how diverse—in both the works of art that each author chose to examine, but also in the philosophical problems upon which they focus—and thus how versatile this approach can be.

Some of the chapters tackle philosophical problems by means of a phenomenological analysis of particular artworks. Others set out simply to understand a work of art or an artist better as a phenomenologically significant activity in its own right, thus suggesting a novel way of thinking about the very being of the artwork itself. But what all the chapters have in common is the sense that, as Steven Crowell expresses it, visual art matters. Crowell's chapter explores a question that will undoubtedly be on the minds of many of our readers—what is the relationship between phenomenology and aesthetics in the study of visual art. For Crowell, aesthetics and phenomenology are not rivals or opponents; aesthetics needs phenomenology because phenomenology can explicitly reintroduce into aesthetics why art matters, something that often seems to be missing from aesthetic studies. Crowell demonstrates how phenomenology situates "the search for a definition of art within a reflection on the horizons in which art shows

itself," and how, therefore, art can "disclose" why we care about it—for example, by showing us why we care about beauty. This is something we can learn from both with a beautiful piece of art and an ugly one, just as abstract art can be as profoundly about a represented object as a representational piece of art is. But to show how art becomes "an irreducible mode of truth," Crowell not only reads Heidegger, but also still lifes by Giorgio Morandi. Heidegger, Crowell argues, was ultimately unable in his work (including his "On the Origin of the Work of Art") to say what makes up the "thinghood of the thing." But Morandi's work is able to make "thinghood ... experienced and understood" in ways that an essay on art and thingliness is not.

We are by no means the first to make the claim about art's phenomenological significance. As Mark Wrathall argues in his chapter, there is a rich tradition in the existentialist-phenomenological school of philosophy of treating art as a mode of philosophical inquiry. In this volume we see ourselves as following the example set by such influential figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre, in using works of art not simply to illustrate an already-formed philosophical question or problem, but also to reconceive and reconstruct the particular questions themselves that are important within the enterprise of philosophy. As is well known, Heidegger examines the Greek temple to think through the structure of unconcealing/concealing, a structure that, Heidegger argues, undergirds each historical world up to the present. Merleau-Ponty sits at the feet of Cezanne to learn from him concerning what it means, as an embodied being, to take up the world that opens itself to us in perception. Art is not a mere means to illustrate a philosophical point for either thinker here. Rather, philosophical insight is attained best through an experience of the work of art itself. For the existential phenomenologists, art is a neighbor to and co-worker with philosophy, and both art and philosophy proceed by directing our attention to our experience of the world. In a very real way, then, art can show us what philosophy, especially phenomenology, should look like. Wrathall reviews the case that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty make for seeing art as a meaningful phenomenological activity. Indeed, as Wrathall notes, Merleau-Ponty claims that art has priority over written philosophy. But Wrathall also shows just how "phenomenological" the concerns of artists have been both in the past (the Renaissance) and more recently in the modern era with artists such as Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, and especially Paul Klee.

Each subsequent chapter likewise illustrates how visual art, especially painting, has a particular power to bring us into contact with the world that we study and in which we study because it can convey what the world itself gives us to perceive "in full innocence," as Merleau-Ponty famously declared. Saying it a different way, Merleau-Ponty claims that "only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees" (2004: 293). How can he say this? Surely not all artists depict

the world without appraising what they see? Do not painters appraise—that is, sort out from among the many landscapes, human faces and forms, objects, colors, and textures, those that they wish to depict? Don't they evaluate and assess which are the best emotions to evoke from their viewers, like enjoyment and appreciation or horror, or outrage? What will provoke thought, produce a sensation? What Merleau-Ponty means is that painting cannot be the translation of what the painter sees into an incommensurable medium. It must communicate visually what the painter sees, even if it is a highly manipulated abstract view or form, and thus a painting cannot help but give us again what the world already gives us as we encounter it in our daily, "unthinking" actions and movements. Just as I do not create the pitcher of water that I see before me on the table, I do not bestow upon it its perceptual and practical meanings—the significance the pitcher holds for me when it comes to the very practical way I might deal with it as a pitcher. And our practical dealings with the world is where phenomenology grounds its analysis, in the space where I experience the world before I reflect upon it and begin to deliberate and make decisions on that experience. Before I think about the pitcher, I come upon it as an object I use without thinking about it, as an already meaningful thing that, as it were, gives itself to me to take it up as it is in its own being. True, these meanings depend in some sense on there being agents like me who are capable of recognizing the thing as the thing it is and, more importantly, using it as such. But there is a real sense in which the meaning resides in the things themselves, and my dealings with them are guided by the way the things solicit and give themselves to me. In Heidegger's terminology, a pitcher is a pitcher for me when I "let it be" what it is;[1] that is, the pitcher attains the full measure of its being when I use it as a vessel that contains, and from which I can pour, liquid. If I tried to use it as a hammer, I would quickly realize that the meaning I gave the object was not just wrong or misconstrued, but in this case, destructive to the object itself.

A painting records this instance of happening upon an object, a scene, a person, and letting them be. But in letting the phenomena of painted color, texture, and line all work together to present to us a pitcher or a human face, a painting doesn't merely represent reality. It duplicates, re-stages the meanings that make up and structure our most basic experience as human perceivers in the world in which we find ourselves, and a world, moreover, that we already know how to perceive as we perceive it. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is not the case when we meet up with the written word. From writers, including writers of philosophy, "we want opinions and advice" (2004: 293). That is, we expect our writers to say something *about* the world, to say something that helps us know how to think about our experience, whereas a painting opens up the possibility of having an experience with the world. A written description of how one uses a pitcher may very well let the pitcher be what it is, but it has not given me the opportunity

to do so in the way that I ordinarily experience and, in fact, make sense of my world. Heidegger would not disagree, despite the fact that he argued that linguistic works of art, "poetry in the narrower sense," have "a privileged position in the domain of the arts" (1977, 1993: 198). This is emphatically not because other forms of art have a linguistically expressible content, and thus are "varieties of the art of language" as language is ordinarily understood. Rather, the privileged position of poetry comes from the way poetry teaches us to rethink the way meaning works. Thus the poem for Heidegger, like the painting for Merleau-Ponty, teaches us to see significations that are operative on us in a way that resists propositional expression. It is beyond the scope of this collection to conduct a *querelle des genres* among art forms or even to explicate fully what both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger meant by their respective claims about writing and language. We do not necessarily mean to privilege visual art or painting as the one true way of doing phenomenology. What is important to the writers in this book is that visual art *can* give us access to the world that we encounter in the primordial situation of our being: in our bodies in a particular time and place, and from within particular contexts and vantage points—in other words, in the pre-reflective space we occupy before we begin to think the world and its meaning by means of concepts we've learned to apply to our experience. These essays individually and collectively show that visual art can help us understand more fundamentally the nature and content of human perception that grounds philosophy as a study of the world in which we actually live. A book about poetry or dance may indeed be able to accomplish this very same task.

One of the vital impulses of the phenomenological approach is to come to a stop at the things themselves, rather than immediately taking them as instrumentalities for some further end. In returning to the things themselves and letting them guide our understanding, "phenomenology is," as Merleau-Ponty insists in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, "the study of essences" (2002: vii), and it is in this spirit that Jeff Malpas's chapter should be read. Malpas takes up the question of art's essence as a way of engaging what art can tell us about ontological concerns. Like Heidegger before him, Malpas argues that the artwork needs to be understood as a work, as something that we come to know as art because of *the way that* it is art, rather than its being a certain kind of object that formally fits a generic definition. Malpas locates art in its processes, not in its objective character, to understand what the relationship is between the artwork and its objective materiality. He turns to metaphor as just such a process that helps illuminate how art situates itself in a particular context in which it has meaning as art. Metaphor works by putting tension and conflict into an instance of language. If we take them in their normal sense, the words used in a particular context don't seem to fit that context, and so we have to make sense of the words by suspending the question of what is true in order to figure out

how the words are being used in this context. Art works by putting tension between its objectivity and the work it performs—the work of disclosing the context in which the artwork becomes a work. Like metaphors, works of art make us revise how we see the original context/setting and at the same time open up our sense of what is possible when words/images are resituated. It is this dynamism in art—its power to become, its power to transcend its own objectivity when resituated, its ability, in other words, to harness the power of freedom to open us to the openness of possibility—that makes art matter for Malpas.

In a way, Violetta Waibel's chapter on Johann Gottlieb Fichte's concept of the *schweben* (oscillation, hovering, floating, suspension) of the imagination in Mark Rothko's art is something of a *demonstratio* of Malpas's argument. Waibel turns to Fichte's "working theory" of the "oscillation," as "schweben" is usually translated, of the imagination between the finite and the infinite, the determined and the determinable. It is this notion of oscillation that allows her to understand how we experience the power of Mark Rothko's color-field paintings. We initially encounter the richly complex and finely nuanced fields of color as contrasts, but a longer view of the work allows these fields also to play off one another in such a way that the painting as a whole becomes a color landscape with the suggestion of depth and, of especial significance, an horizon. In fact, Fichte helps her interpret, as well as articulate, how Rothko in this interplay of color and "object" (i.e., the horizon) tries to stage an emotional drama for his onlookers, a tragedy, as the contours of human existence both emerge and dispel in our experience viewing the work.

In phenomenology we want to understand the thing, the work itself; we, for instance, want to "do phenomenology" by studying artworks very carefully as phenomena, as things of physical substance that we encounter not only because we have bodies, but also in our bodies. It is for that reason that we cannot speak of essences, Merleau-Ponty aptly observes, if we do not "put essences back into existence" (2002: vii). Here again, Merleau-Ponty translates Heidegger's insistence that philosophy attune itself to the basic "facticity" of our existence, but the French philosopher also (pardon the pun) fleshes out the German philosopher's thinking on what the "facticity" of our existence is. For Merleau-Ponty, our facticity cannot be understood apart from an understanding of our bodies. The body is the primordial situation of my being. The implications of his claim to philosophy are tremendous. It has the potential for overthrowing the priority of that dimension of being human that has so often been considered the very root of our existence since Descartes, our consciousness. For phenomenology insists that my consciousness—my awareness of myself, others, objects, all of the things that make up my world—is rooted in my experience in the world, and this experience is, in turn, rooted in my body. I am fundamentally an embodied being, and any attempt I make to understand or explain what, where, why,

how, or even that I am must build itself on this "fact" of my being. Phenomenology rejects the Cartesian grounding of consciousness in the thinking self, the famous *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore, I am"), and the mind/body dualism that it establishes as the "given" feature of our being. Merleau-Ponty's pointed rejoinder to Descartes is: "The world is not what I think, but what I live through" (2002: xviii). The world that we "relearn to look at" is the world of my actual, embodied, lived experience. Wayne Martin's chapter takes up the problem of the structure of conscious experience, but he looks very carefully at Lucas Cranach the Elder's oft-executed paintings on the theme of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the context of Reformation thought to engage this problem in a pre-Cartesian framework. By doing so, Martin shows how effectively the study of art in its contexts can help us situate the study of philosophy in its own contexts as well.

Martin's essay demonstrates how necessary this work of "relearning" is, but also how very carefully it must be done, for in the modern era our ways of talking about and knowing ourselves, others, and the world (as exemplified most clearly in the sciences, but also present in history and philosophy itself) have become, as it were, disembodied ways of knowing, where both the self and world are objectified totalities that we can represent and rationally grasp as such in our study of them. Phenomenology's job is to help us do this careful, hard work of rethinking the most basic terms in which we explore what it is and means to be human as we are in our bodies. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty says, "all of [phenomenology's] efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status" (2002: vii). Sean Kelly's study nicely demonstrates how painting can help us to "*re-achieve*" this "direct and primitive contact with the world," precisely because it facilitates the way in which we perceive it by re-enacting the basic situation of our being as embodied perceivers who bear themselves into the world by taking it up in its givenness. Kelly offers perhaps the most direct engagement in this collection of phenomenology with art as it has been constituted in art history. While not offered as a critique of the discipline, Kelly nevertheless shows that the story that art history tells about the progress of "realism" (the development of perspective, techniques of producing verisimilitude, etc.) in art since the Italian Renaissance can be taken as a somewhat different (and more valuable phenomenologically) story of "the perceptually driven desire to capture aspects of our everyday experience of objects rather than … the metaphysically driven desire to present the features of the object as it is independent of us." Artists from Jan van Eyck to Cezanne to the video artist Bill Viola have increasingly developed the techniques and approaches that allow our stories of the history of art to fully facilitate our understanding of art as that which "include[s] the rich and complicated fact that we are active, embodied

perceivers in the world," which allows art, in turn, to teach us what it can about the very nature of experience itself.

Indeed, because the phenomenological questions and methods we employ attune us to how we experience particular works of art, we have felt obligated to pay especially close attention to the phenomena that these artworks themselves are. This is a different kind of inquiry than that engaged in by traditional aesthetic or art-historical modes of studying artwork, because we take the work of art as performing an important role in teaching us to engage with the world. Nevertheless, aesthetic and art-historical questions and concerns are very much part of the context in which several of the works are considered and, we hope, the phenomenological analysis is not without implications for aesthetics and art history. We regard this book as an invitation to the reader to, first of all, continue the project of phenomenologically engaging with works of art. In addition, we hope that the book might be treated by all students and scholars of visual art, not just other phenomenologists, as an invitation to extend a conversation begun here on the value of seeing art as a mode of inquiry into some of the most basic questions we can ask about how we experience the world. Joseph D. Parry's and Béatrice Han-Pile's chapters on Sandro Botticelli and Vermeer, respectively, are particularly well-suited to inaugurating such a conversation.

Han-Pile challenges the two-pronged trajectory of scholarship on Dutch seventeenth century painting—one of which understands the art through our sense of its cultural context (e.g., Protestant ethics, the tastes of the merchant class), and the other of which is "based upon a descriptive, realist approach to the world" that also reflects other cultural practices of contemporary Dutch society (interest in cartography and optics). She does this by performing a Heideggerian reading of Vermeer's work in order to understand what distinguishes this work as *artwork*. Vermeer's art is particularly effective at disclosing the world in his paintings by drawing us into that world through what the represented figures are doing; for instance, the work that the Milkmaid is performing. But it is also at this level of practical involvement, where we become aware of and relate to the "network of relations and possibilities associated with the practices themselves," that we, the viewers, encounter our inability to access fully a world that is past. Of course, our relationship to the past, as Joseph D. Parry's chapter on Sandro Botticelli's *Uffizi Annunciation* shows, is also about how we relate to the future and to the sense of possibility we discern in being. Parry is interested in how paintings of historical subjects take up that sense of possibility-that-has-been in order to accomplish two of history's most central tasks in a phenomenological understanding of being: enowning one's past and understanding freedom, or possibility, as the power to break with the past.

In the last chapter, John Brough looks at film as phenomenology. This provides an opening to take a step back from our primary focus on painting

in order to revisit and, hopefully, re-open the term "visual art" and its relation to phenomenology. We have not here included other forms of visual art—prominently sculpture and architecture—nor do we explicitly explore the visual dimensions of other performance art genres such as dance and theater. That work needs to be done, in addition to the ongoing work being pursued in film and phenomenology. But Brough's treatment of film as phenomenology in light of the very basic conception of phenomenology that Edmund Husserl set forth in his foundational thinking is a good model for posing the different kinds of question, from the most basic, to the more precise and nuanced, that we need to keep asking about the phenomenological significance of visual art in general, as well as of each form of visual art, in particular.

Note

1 See *On the Essence of Truth* in D.F. Krell (ed.) (1993) *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, San Francisco: HarperCollins.

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THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF ART

Mark Wrathall

Art and the existential-phenomenological tradition

One of the characteristic traits of the existential-phenomenological tradition in philosophy is a serious engagement with the fine arts – literature, poetry, theater, music, and the plastic arts. By the existential-phenomenological tradition, I mean the tradition of philosophers influenced by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, with its deep roots in the work of Nietzsche. This engagement with the arts doesn't typically take the form of a philosophy *of* art or an aesthetics. These philosophers are not primarily interested in offering a philosophical account of what art *is*. Nor are they interested merely in using art work as an occasion or excuse for philosophical reflection, nor as a mere illustration of philosophical doctrines. Rather, these philosophers believe that works of art at their best are capable of showing us the phenomena under consideration more directly, powerfully, and perspicuously than any philosophical prose could.

This reliance on works of art stems from the phenomenologists' understanding of the method and task of phenomenological inquiry. Heidegger sums it up this way:

> The word ["phenomenology"] only gives insight into *how* one is to exhibit and deal with that which is supposed to be dealt with in this science. A science "of" phenomena means: grasping its objects in such a way that everything which is up for discussion must be dealt with in a direct exhibition and a direct demonstration. The expression "descriptive phenomenology," which is at bottom tautological, has the same meaning. Here "description" does not mean a method of the sort of, say, botanical morphology. The title has rather a prohibitive sense: steering clear of all non-demonstrative determination. . . . *Every exhibiting of an entity in such a way that it shows itself in itself may, with formal legitimacy, be called "phenomenology."*[1]
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> (Heidegger 1962: G34–35)