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Phenomenology After Conceptual Art

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Abstract

The reception of phenomenology in art criticism reached its apex in the mid-1960s in its application to Minimalism in the United States. The focus was on the embodied, direct perceptual experience of Minimalist sculpture, but in light of Conceptual art's 'dematerialised' practices, which developed as the decade progressed, the interest in phenomenology waned. This paper looks at the history of this reception and presents Merleau-Ponty's late ontological work as a corrective to an inadequate understanding of phenomenology in critical discourses on art at the time. It argues that the late Merleau-Ponty offers tools for an effective critique of early conceptualism's idealism, as well as a basis on which the 'dematerialised' and dispersed ontology of the art work shared by both Conceptual and more recent Post-Conceptual practices can be investigated.

1. Phenomenology After Conceptual Art

In his article "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" the artist Robert Smithson described a visit to the slate quarries of Bangor-Pen Angyl in Pennsylvania. Contemplating a wall of rock reflected in a murky lake, he wrote of how "all boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate and collapsed all notions of gestalt unity" (Smithson 1996, 100). Smithson's article was published in September 1968 in *Artforum*, an art journal that between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s carried a series of historically important statements by Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, Mel Bochner, and Joseph Kosuth, among others. We are on the cusp of Conceptual art's heyday in New York, the city from which Smithson ventured out on field trips to sites in the industrial and suburban margins. Among his companions on this particular outing are his wife, the sculptor Nancy Holt, and Dan Graham, whose photo-text work "Homes for America" (published in *Arts Magazine* two years prior to this trip) was to become a canonical early example of conceptualism. On other trips the company included the chief practitioners of Minimal art: Carl André, Donald Judd and Robert Morris. The latter two were not only active makers, they were also artists who wrote and whose writings have continued to have more or less as much influence as their works. However, there is a difference between Judd and Morris on the one hand and Smithson and Graham on the other. Whilst the former would not have seen their writing as art, the latter explicitly did.

Minimalism and Conceptual art were so closely related in this milieu as to resemble siblings, if not twins in some respects. There was no significant generational divide between their early proponents. Nonetheless, there was an historical and philosophical caesura between them, and this can be located symptomatically in their attitudes to "notions of gestalt unity" and the phenomenological stance implied in Smithson's phrase. Phenomenology's critical stock was high during the first half of the decade, but fell as the focus shifted from the

situated perception of the object in Minimalism to the dematerialisation of the object with Conceptual art. What this paper looks at are phenomenology's vacillating theoretical and critical fortunes in this context. It does this with the aim of speculating on the possibility of bringing phenomenological ideas back to bear on contemporary Post-conceptual art.

In an interview Robert Smithson gave the year after publishing "Sedimentation," the artist spoke of considering "the facile unitary or gestalt ideas part of the expressive fallacy" (Lippard 1977, 89). It would be reasonable to suppose that, at least in part, he was responding to the ideas espoused by his friend Robert Morris who held that the human body determines the perception of scale and should be the measure for sculpture, a viewpoint which itself was based on the phenomenological idea that the world gave itself to be grasped as a gestalt (Morris 1995, 11). Smithson is diametrically opposed to Morris here, as he says: "You just have to deal with the fundamentals of matter and mind, completely devoid of any anthropomorphic interests" (Lippard 1977, 89). By and large, it seems to be Morris's version of phenomenology that Smithson is rejecting here.

However, some things about Smithson should make us think twice about the prevalent view that there is an incompatibility between phenomenology and conceptualism. Primarily, Smithson did not reduce art to information or concept, nor to the discourse or text of post-modern criticism; he resists such reduction because "the interaction between matter and mind" is what his work was about (Lippard 1977, 89). It is true, nonetheless, that this interaction certainly is not synonymous with that which phenomenology classically entertained; it is not a question of intentionality and intentional objects. Regarding his site visits and the 'nonsite' gallery works he subsequently produced abstractly mapping them, Smithson spoke of being embarked on "a return to the origins of material, sort of a dematerialization of refined matter" (Lippard 1977, 87). He was not seeking a concept, but a material reality, one which is both mirrored by and mirrors the mind that is part of it. The more militant Conceptual artists, as Peter Osborne has recently pointed out, sought to eliminate the aesthetic dimension of art (2013, 47–51). Smithson was not among them. In fact, he rejected an art dissolved into ideas, for the reason that "it only deals with the mind and it has to deal with the material too." (Lippard 1977, 89). If Post-conceptual art, which Osborne argues is how contemporary art is best categorised, has given up on Conceptual art's idealism, then the return of an aesthetic dimension was nonetheless an achievement of Conceptual art, in as much as, in failing to rid itself of it, conceptualism "demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a *necessary*, though *radically insufficient*, component of the artwork" (Osborne 2013, 49). It is necessary, in Osborne's view, as "all art requires *some* form of materialization; that is to say, aesthetic – felt, spatio-temporal – presentation." (2013, 48). Yet, it is insufficient because Post-conceptual art cannot be defined on the basis of its aesthetic form – that is to say, its medium. To do justice to Osborne's substantial theorising of Post-conceptual art would require a different essay from the current one. Suffice it to say that he would not countenance a return to phenomenology. Nonetheless, his affirmation of the necessity of a "felt, spatio-temporal" dimension is indicative of what would make phenomenology's return into critical discourse desirable, just as his recognition that this aesthetic presentation need not be either singular or specific indicates a challenge for a phenomenologically-oriented approach.

The question remains as to what form of phenomenology would be desirable to see return. The second aspect in Smithson that should give us reason for reconsidering a phenomenological perspective also helps on this count, as the mirroring of mind and matter

on which the artist speculated echoes the late Merleau-Ponty's talk of the intertwining of sensing and the sensed. Smithson envisaged the interaction of mind and matter as an apocalyptic maelstrom, the one folding into the other in an infinite and abyssal regress. But, this is not a purely intellectual notion; Smithson is describing an *experience* of infinity. When Merleau-Ponty writes that the "veritable infinity" is not the negation of being but "infinity of the *Lebenswelt* and not infinity of idealisation" (1968, 169), the proximity between him and Smithson starts to become apparent. The lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) for Merleau-Ponty is precisely that ground in which subject and object, self and other, sensed and sensing are intertwined with one another such that neither can, alone, found the possibility of the other. Without wanting at all to conflate Smithson's artistic stance with Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position, I wonder whether there is not perhaps greater affinity between the disorientation of entropy the former evoked and the pre-objective world that the latter sought to expose than would at first appear when judged both by Smithson's own attitude to phenomenology and by phenomenological criticism's historical eclipse at the moment his work emerges. The reason for this eclipse, and the possibility that it is based on an inadequate reception of phenomenology, is a large part of that with which the current paper will occupy itself. It does this, as I say, because my purpose is to explore the possibility of engaging phenomenology again within in art theory. To do so, starting from where phenomenology sank behind art's critical horizon seems as good a point as any.

One aspect of Conceptual and Post-conceptual art that presents a challenge to phenomenology is that it is not, for the most part, identical with any singular aesthetic object. The work of artists like Smithson or a British contemporary such as Richard Long, and of contemporary artists for whom that generation has been a decisive influence like Francis Alÿs, is often dispersed across various media. Ultimately, Conceptual and Post-conceptual practice is not unified within a single object, but might appear as a photograph at one point, a text the next and as film or happening further on. The walking that plays a large role in the practices of Long and Alÿs is symptomatic. It is integral to their work, but cannot be presented as an object for contemplation, or even as a situation that can be participated in apart from at the moment in which it happens. Long's practice, for example, has had as its consistent centre of gravity since the late 1960s the treks he performs through landscapes in various parts of the world. This walking may be represented by a photograph or a map, a series of words or a sculpture made of materials collected along the walk's course, but none of these tangible products are in their own right 'the work'. The latter exists as the link between each of these discrete instances, linking the visible and legible indices of the work to the walk, which, though physical while it happens, is, as Long notes, "afterwards invisible" (Long 2007, 26).

Walking or travel has had a similar status in Alÿs's work. For his piece *The Loop* (1997), the artist travelled from Mexico, where he lives, to San Diego for the exhibition that had commissioned the work. He did so, however, by circumnavigating the globe, crossing Australia and Alaska on the way, to get to the U.S. and nonetheless avoid crossing the Mexican-U.S. border. The piece was recorded in the form of a simple map of his route hung on the wall, and in the format of a postcard, appropriately enough, handed out to visitors and bearing an image of an ocean, the curvature of the globe just perceptible on its horizon but no land visible, and below it a brief text describing the work. Often Alÿs describes the form his work aspires to exist in as rumour. He has spoken of endeavouring to create "a very schematic structure" in his work, "so that the project can travel as a rumour or story even

while the event or performance is happening.” Viewers should be able to “imagine it without having to witness it ‘live’, or having access to visual documentation” (Alÿs et al. 2004, 81). Like Long, then, who has written that “the freedom to use precisely all degrees of visibility and permanence” is important to his practice, Alÿs wants to detach the work from a specific moment of perceptual encounter, for which reason it is “composed of episodes, metaphors and parables” (Ferguson 2007, 11). Shot through with invisibility and absence, dispersed across space and time, not to mention across the diversity of media they may employ from the photograph to ‘rumour’, these practices clearly stretch the resources of a phenomenology that focuses on an embodied, direct perception of the object, which, as we will see, was the most prevalent art critical understanding of phenomenology contemporary with the rise of Conceptual art. So, we need to ask whether there is another phenomenology that might be more appropriate.

I will suggest that it is within the late Merleau-Ponty that an alternative may be sought. Jean-François Lyotard, who was more obviously and openly influenced by Merleau-Ponty than most well-known French philosophers of his generation, wrote that “Merleau-Ponty would not have been a great commentator on Cézanne if ‘Cézanne’s doubt’ hadn’t been his own.” (1991, 187). Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Eye and Mind,” published a couple of decades after his first substantial foray into aesthetics in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” moved on to discussing an artist, Paul Klee, whose art is more clearly detached from the nineteenth-Century Realism that Cézanne’s was still working through. Nonetheless, the analyses in this later essay are still far being such that they could be readily extended to either Conceptual or Post-conceptual art. What was it, then, that Lyotard was indicating Merleau-Ponty shared with Cézanne? Perhaps the ability and propensity to decompose the perceived into the event of perception. The latter, perception, as Lyotard noted in an earlier work, “Merleau-Ponty strenuously placed ... under the authority of the body” (2011, 55). Indeed “it is the body and it alone,” Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “that can bring us to the things” (1968, 136). “The thickness of the body,” more precisely, is “the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things” (135). So, Lyotard was right, in as much as the body as “an *exemplar sensible*” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135) is of central importance to Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception to the end, just as perception itself is to his ontology. This thread of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, though an integral part with fundamental importance to his way of doing phenomenology, is nonetheless not a promising place to pick up at for current art theory. This is because embodied perception was central to, and perhaps overemphasised in, the reception of phenomenology within Minimalist criticism in the mid-1960s, after which ‘phenomenological experience’ falls into neglect as the emphasis shifts from perception and the body to language and idea as the decade unfolded.

But, this is to read Merleau-Ponty’s late work in light of his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*, rather than the earlier in light of the later work. When we do the latter, we notice that in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty sees the body as *but* an *exemplar*; it is only a “variant” of the flesh, “that carnal being, as a being of depths,” even if it is “a very remarkable one” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136). What changes in the late work, is that sentience and the sensed cease to repel one another as if they were two theoretical magnets and become, instead, both referred to being, of whose ‘thickness’ or ‘depth’ they are two variants. This new constellation is clearest in ‘The Intertwining’ chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, wherein the author writes that “belongingness to one same ‘consciousness’” is not “the primordial definition of sensibility,” which we should rather

understand as “a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and the sensed to the sentient” (1968, 142). As the end of ‘The Intertwining’ chapter shows, Merleau-Ponty envisaged a revised integration of language and cultural forms with perception within this new ontology. He did not follow up on this suggestion, his work on the book being broken off before he could; however, he had been laying the groundwork for some time, starting in the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” some 10 years before. It is this development, picked up and elaborated upon over recent decades (for example, in Renaud Barbaras’s phenomenology of life and of desire and Ted Toadvine’s eco-phenomenology), that with its potential for integrating the discussion of culture, language and history with that of perception, indicates, I suggest, the sort of phenomenology required.

2. Conceptual Art After Phenomenology

The Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth published a now famous article in 1969 entitled “Art after Philosophy.” The philosophy in question was largely Logical Positivism. Kosuth’s article was an attempt to define what was ‘conceptual’ about Conceptual art, and both to extend the idea of art as idea to all art *per se*, as well as to designate those practices that transformed an essential in itself conceptualism of art generally into a strong, for itself, Conceptual practice. The somewhat strident views expounded in Kosuth’s article were not fully subscribed to by any of the other key figures at the time, and, although the argumentation is certainly not without interest, the essay has received its fair share of theoretical critiques over the years, including those to be found in Thierry de Duve’s *Kant After Duchamp* and Rosalind Krauss’s *A Voyage on the North Sea*. Strident or not, Kosuth’s thesis was, in one point, not particularly partisan. It reflects the general view held by Conceptual artists and their apologists that phenomenology was largely irrelevant to art – irrelevant, at least, to the art they made or espoused. Kosuth is explicit on this point. Right at the outset, in his second paragraph, he writes that “‘continental’ philosophy need not seriously be considered here,” specifying in a footnote “existentialism and phenomenology” as the continental philosophies he is setting aside (Kosuth 1999, 159). The one philosopher mentioned by name in this footnote is Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

For Kosuth’s milieu, Merleau-Ponty’s name was almost synonymous with phenomenology. His *Phenomenology of Perception* was first published in English translation in 1962 and it is to this book, either directly or indirectly, that most allusions to ‘phenomenology’ by artists and critics in the United States during the remainder of the decade can be referred. The key delineations of Merleau-Ponty’s book are very clearly the basis for Robert Morris’s argument in his essay “Notes on Sculpture, Part II,” first published in 1966. Firstly, Morris argues that the object of sculpture is relative to the perception of the viewer, who is to be conceived as a situated and embodied subject. Secondly, the sculpture is considered to be a function of the total situation it is encountered within, which includes lighting and positioning. “Notes on Sculpture” is, beside another sculptor’s essay, Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects,” arguably the most important manifesto of Minimalist art; it proselytises for an art based on the body, its movement and situation, just as *Phenomenology of Perception* argues that perception, transcendence towards the world, is to be traced back to the embodied subject engaged in its tasks. The discovery of Merleau-Ponty by contemporary critics Annette Michelson and Michael Fried seems to have preceded Morris’s, though Morris seems to have been the only exponent of Minimalist sculpture to have actually read the

philosopher's work (Meyer 1998, 178); and it was Morris's recourse to phenomenology that was soon followed up by sympathetic critics, prominent among whom was Rosalind Krauss.

In her article "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," published in the same year and same journal as Morris's "Notes on Sculpture, Part II," Krauss was already using phenomenology as an analytical tool. The culmination of her efforts to bring Merleau-Ponty together with Minimalism came a decade later, however, in her first major work, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, which, as Hal Foster put it, "gives us a minimalist history of modernist sculpture" (Foster 1996, 42) stretching 50 or so years from Auguste Rodin's "Gates of Hell" to Morris himself, alongside Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and Michael Heizer in its final chapter. Again, it is *Phenomenology of Perception* among Merleau-Ponty's writings that is most commonly referenced by Krauss during this stage of her career. Her reading of that work is largely congruent with the use Morris makes of it, but with one significant difference. On the one hand her interpretation seems to be a classical reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*, in as much as she talks of phenomenology having re-characterised "perception as a function of intentionality, as the simultaneous cause and result of the viewer's *prise sur le monde*" (Krauss 1981, 262). On the other hand, Krauss reads the sculpture to which she applies phenomenology as effecting a radical de-centering of the subject. If Krauss sees this de-centering as being congruent with Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*, as indeed she seems to, then the version of the book she gives us is unconventional. A subjectivity that is defined as an intentional grasping of the world is more centered than not, even if it is defined as finding itself in its activity in the world, as it is in Merleau-Ponty's book. Indeed, while one can find support for a notion of de-centered subjectivity in *Phenomenology*, the perceptual subject presented in that book as a whole is a unified one. Let us be clear, however: it is not that Krauss misunderstands the book, but that she seems to be projecting its analyses and themes into another interpretative context.

Krauss's discussion of Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) is symptomatic. Heizer's earthwork, consisting of two ramps cut into opposite sides of a ravine in Nevada, is vast: almost half a kilometre in length from one side of the valley to the other. It offers no visual figure for the viewer on the ground and, so, as Krauss says, "the only means of experiencing the work is to be in it." Here, we are not far at all from Morris's phenomenology: the work is constituted for him, too, in the interaction between the viewer and the object. "We can only stand in one slotted space and look across to the other," Krauss writes, and continues: "Indeed it is only by looking at the other that we can form a picture of the space in which we stand" (1981, 280). This last sentence is key to Krauss's phenomenological interpretation of sculpture and, indeed, to her interpretation of phenomenology. In terms of the reading of sculptural practice, the work is seen as coming into being in the viewer's encounter with the object, but crucially at the expense of the autonomous identity of both. In terms of phenomenology's interpretation, as the viewers discover themselves through the other (that is to say, through the object and the others' viewpoints of it), intersubjectivity comes to displace subjectivity. Krauss goes as far as to describe *Double Negative* as a metaphor for "the self as it is known through its appearance to the other." This is an inversion of the classic Husserlian understanding of the other apprehend via "analogical appresentation"; that is, the other known through analogy with the self. This account of the other is already critiqued by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the chapter entitled "Others and the Human World," wherein he says that "reasoning by analogy presupposes what it is meant to explain" (2012, 368). The argument implied here is that analogy, though

it might be able to loan the other the appearance of being a self, cannot establish it as *other*. The identity of the self cannot function as an analogy for the other's alterity. So, here it is the alterity of the other that Merleau-Ponty is saying is apparently explained and yet actually presupposed. Eventually, this critique of Husserl will move from the margins to the centre of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The priority of intersubjectivity that will emerge in the later work, however, had not yet been made explicit in his *Phenomenology*, where the subject's interaction with their environment is, for the most part, presented as constituting it as a world of phenomena for a subject that is largely unified in its embodied existence.

In the late 1970s Krauss wrote a string of essays on photography and Surrealism, in which psychoanalysis and semiotics came to displace phenomenology. At this time, she was just starting to hone a notion of the unconscious that would eventually be brought back to bear critically on certain phenomenological themes in her work from the early 1990s on. This is at least part of the context that Krauss anticipates in her slightly eccentric reading of *Phenomenology*. In her 1983 essay "Richard Serra, a Translation," however, she returned to the phenomenological themes and exposition developed in her earlier book. Central to this essay is another work that is sited, like Heizer's *Double Negative*, in the landscape. Richard Serra's *Shift* (1970–1972) consists of around a quarter of a kilometre of concrete walls that zig-zag down an undulating field in Canada. The top of each wall is level, but eventually disappears within the swell of the terrain, across the crests of which the walls form a series of parallel tangents. The position of the walls was determined by the course Serra and a companion walking down the field took while trying to keep one another in sight, so that the resulting work is plotted from the way in which one part of the terrain is revealed as the viewer moves across it while another part is concealed. The viewer's movement in relation to the structure is, thereby, made the subject of the work, although it is only 'present' as a background against which the relation between the land, the walls, and the viewer's body is perceived. *Shift* is then a work that, again, can only be experienced when the viewer is moving through and around it, i.e. while they are physically encountering it: the work was conceived, Krauss succinctly puts it, "as a network of perspectives that ... would constantly define one's vision of the object in terms of one's relation to it" (Krauss 1985, 267). When Krauss then describes Serra's sculpture as having the "chiasmic trajectory" between seer and seen as its subject, she in effect makes explicit the radicality of her reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* (Krauss 1985, 270). Although nowhere in Krauss's writings of this period does she, to my knowledge, mention Merleau-Ponty's unfinished last book *The Visible and the Invisible*, her use of the term 'chiasmic' makes it clear that she is reading the *Phenomenology* in light of Merleau-Ponty's later work, because the 'chiasm' is a concept that Merleau-Ponty had not yet settled on in the earlier book. This later ontology, in which sensing and the sensed are mutually implicated within one another, would seem, therefore, to be the other part of the context into which Krauss recasts the embodied subject of Merleau-Ponty's earlier work. The art works to which she applied such ideas, however, were ones in which an embodied viewer and their direct, active perception was foremost: the work as object is perceived as literally present, just as the viewer experiences their own presence in relation to it. At least, this would be a relatively standard reading of Minimalism; but Krauss insinuates an absence into the heart of this presence, one that sets up and sustains it. Although Krauss abandoned phenomenology as she moved her focus to other forms of practice and other critical goals, we may ask whether the chiasmic relationship between absence and presence she started

to outline within Heizer and Serra's work might not also be adapted to 'dematerialised' practices.

3. The Rejection of Phenomenology

In part, Morris's interest in the moving body of the viewer in relation to his sculptures came from the involvement he had with experimental dance at the time. Later, his then wife, the choreographer Yvonne Rainer, spoke of how Minimalism suppressed emotion (Meyer 2009, 152). This was undoubtedly partly to do with its own repressed roots in Greenbergian Formalism, whose search for a proper, if historical, essence to art it unwittingly reproduced in attempting to outbid it. Equally, though, phenomenology also tended to bracket feelings in an attempt to get to 'existentials', as Heidegger called them, the *a priori* categories of experience. Yes, in *Being and Time* Heidegger famously prioritises feeling (*Stimmung*, mood) ahead of understanding as the basis for our openness to Being. Nonetheless, only the single, specific feeling of anxiety is deemed adequate to the task of inaugurating an authentic openness for the subject. As Giorgio Agamben (1999) points out, love is not mentioned once in Heidegger's *Magnum Opus*. Indeed, love, judging by Rainer's work subsequent to the Minimalist moment, is probably not far from what she had in mind when using this word 'emotion'; love as a complex emotional relation to another person, to an *other*. Alterity brings me to another exclusion of both Minimalism and phenomenology – at least the phenomenology of *Phenomenology of Perception* and Heidegger's *Being and Time* – namely, gender. Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* is, as Jacques Derrida (2008) showed, neutral as to sexual difference. Given that Heidegger explicitly designates embodiment as secondary to *Dasein*, this is, perhaps, not surprising. More surprising, though, is the absence of any serious discussion of gender in Merleau-Ponty's book seeing as it is account of the primacy of embodiment. However, I am digressing.

What led to Conceptual art's rejection of phenomenology was not so much questions of emotion, or gender or sexual difference, at least not in the first instance, but rather more the fact that phenomenological criticism seemed to miss, and not only miss but also actively cover over, the ideological structure of the art world. The move to other intellectual pastures was motivated by an awareness of what is essentially the same "gap between individual and phenomenological experience and structural intelligibility" that, as Fredric Jameson notes, had caused realism to lose its critical potential as an aesthetic mode at the end of the Nineteenth Century. Jameson continues: "to put it more simply, if in the newly decentered situation of the imperialist network, you live something strongly and concretely, it is unintelligible, since its ultimate determinants lie outside your own field of experience" (Jameson 2007, 241). With Conceptual art this suspicion steadily develops: beyond the phenomenologically experienced work of art there are determining structures and conditions that remain invisible. In fact, works of art themselves are suspected of concealing the framework which subtends them: the work of art is an "illusion," the French artist Daniel Buren wrote in 1970, which "cancels out its viewpoint (the Museum/Gallery) ... making the latter pass for a vague neutral frame" (Buren 1973, 45). Here it is the self-effacing structure of ideology, perhaps most influentially summed up in Roland Barthes's early critique of myth delivered in the late 1950s, which is seen to have escaped the phenomenological grasp, being as it is beyond direct, perceptual experience.

"This is what the dominant ideology wants," Buren wrote, "that what is contained [the work of art] should provide, very subtly, a screen for the container [the museum or gallery]"

(1973, 38). An obvious response to this situation, then, is to get rid of the work of art as a discrete and containable, essentially collectable and curatable object, as many artists aspired to do at the time. The critic Lucy Lippard was one of the first to recognise this tendency, for which she supplied the enduring if contested label 'dematerialisation' in an article published in 1968 (Lippard and Chandler, 1999). Among the many exhibitions mounted during the 6 years referred to in the title of Lippard's subsequent anthology of Conceptual art spanning the years 1966–1972, was one organised in New York by the dealer Seth Siegelaub in 1969. *January 5–31, 1969*, as the show is known, was one of the first significant exhibitions focused on the nature of Conceptual art (Osborne 2002, 29). It is also one whose form well exemplifies Lippard's term, as Siegelaub conceived of the catalogue, which was composed of a collection of the artists' statements and photos relating to the work, as "primary," whereas "the physical exhibition," he said, "was auxiliary to it" (Lippard 1977, 125). On the face of it, once art has been 'dematerialised', whether it be through use of language in the form of instructions, proposals and descriptions of works, or through other forms of information (another buzzword of the time), phenomenology was no longer relevant to the critical appraisal of these practices as they displaced the situated, embodied viewer Morris had in mind.

Siegelaub included four artists in his 1969 exhibition. One of the four was Kosuth. Another was Lawrence Weiner. Eight of Weiner's works were listed in the catalogue, which itself was exhibited in one room during the show while a selection of the textual works the catalogue contained were exhibited in material form in another room. Included in both rooms – that is to say, included in both the catalogue in its textual form as well as in material form in the 'auxiliary' exhibition – was Weiner's *A 36" x 36" removal to the lathing or support wall of plaster or wallboard from a wall* (1968). The title here describes precisely what was physically manifest in the second room. What is important, however, is that Weiner saw the two – textual statement and material realisation – as equivalent. The catalogue also contained his "Statement of Intent" in which he wrote, talking of such textual propositions, that "the piece need not be built," thereby implying that the proposal was sufficient itself for his 'piece', the work, to be said to exist (Alberro 1999, xxii). So it is possible to say, as Weiner himself maintained, that, whether it is the textual statement one reads or a physical manifestation, whether the statement is read in a catalogue or on a gallery wall, and regardless of the physical structure of the wall the work is materialised upon, it is the *same* work (Lippard 1977, 129).

4. From One Phenomenology to Another

One way to account for this would be to follow Kosuth and say that Weiner's work is an idea. "Works of art are analytical propositions," Kosuth wrote, "A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intentions, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, a definition of art." (1999, 165). For Kosuth, therefore, it did not matter whether the work took the form of a text or object, because ultimately the idea is to be received independently of its material form, its 'morphology' as he referred to it. This conception would clearly lead us, as it did Kosuth, away from a situation in which phenomenology could find much resonance or purchase. It is a conception of the work that, being founded on the logical operation of self-definition with its aspiration to transparency and clarity, would seem to lead inevitably to an attempt to deny or bracket out the ambiguity of phenomenal existence. This was unsuccessful, as the failure of Conceptual art

to eliminate the aesthetic alluded to at the beginning this paper indicates. As a theoretical position, it is vulnerable to the same critique Merleau-Ponty applies in *The Visible and the Invisible* to the dichotomies set up by Husserl and Sartre between consciousness and being. In this book Merleau-Ponty continued in intensified form his project, begun in the *Phenomenology*, to correct the idealist notion he finds in Husserl of a consciousness that “is defined by its presence to itself, its immanence” (Barbaras 2004, 56). If the divide between it and being were absolute, in the way such a conception of consciousness would imply, then the in-itself of being could not become the for-itself of consciousness. That is to say, conceived of as mutually exclusive opposites, the connection between being and consciousness evident in intentionality becomes inexplicable. Merleau-Ponty suggests, therefore, that they must rather be conceived as intertwined, each carrying the implication and potential of the other within it. Even if, in his subsequent career, Kosuth showed a more nuanced approach, in his early essay it is a similar immanence that is envisaged for art to that which Husserl envisaged for consciousness. The subsumption of a spatio-temporal form under an immaterial idea, and the reduction of the differences between such manifestations to the identity of the idea, is a similar idealism. Osborne pinpoints the problem with characteristic lucidity, although, as I have already indicated, his is not a phenomenological approach: Conceptual artists like Kosuth misconstrued art as having an “ideational ontological purity,” and, in as much as they based their own practice on this conception, they were labouring under a “self-misunderstanding” (2013, 109).

Richard Long visited Siegelau's *January Show* and was impressed by Weiner's work. Nonetheless, as Smithson had done, he later distanced himself from the idea of “replacing the object with language” (Wallis 2009, 48). Indeed Weiner's “Statement of Intent” can be read this way. It can be understood as claiming that the work and the textual proposition are ultimately synonymous. Weiner writes in it that his pieces may be made – by himself or someone else – or remain textual statements, all of which are “equal and consistent with the intent of the artist.” It does, indeed, sound as if he were saying that the statement is sufficient in itself, its realisation being merely ‘auxiliary’. Weiner spoke in another context of using language “in an attempt to get across *only* the content, in the most concise package,” and yet it is not at all certain that Weiner's work actually replaces “the object with language” (Lippard 1977, 130). Take, for example, Weiner's work *Many colored objects placed side by side to form a row of many colored objects*, 1979, which has been realised repeatedly over the years in vinyl, neon or painted lettering inside galleries or in exterior spaces. Firstly, and most obviously, Weiner's text, whether printed on a page or stencilled on a wall, is an object, a row of letters, and it refers to itself as such. It alludes then to the fact that “the transcendence of the sign toward [its] sense,” as Barbaras writes, “never abolishes the sign's materiality, never reaches a transparent meaning” (2004, 53). Weiner's words, as all written words, not only refer beyond themselves and derive their ability to do so from belonging to a linguistic system, but are also material inscriptions with phenomenal thickness. Secondly, Weiner's text also, as again all language arguably does, bears a reference to a phenomenal world, even if that world is no more than potential. The very fact that the letters forming the words of the statement *could* also themselves count as “colored objects placed side by side” makes the irreducible referential potentiality of language, as well as that referentiality's ambiguity, apparent.

The use of language, text as a medium, has nonetheless been seen as central to conceptualism's attempt to distil art's “ideational ontological purity.” However, despite the

impression of transparency it can at times produce, language is not synonymous with ideas, which is borne out by this reading of Weiner's *Many colored objects*. Indeed, in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" Merleau-Ponty spoke of "an opacity of language." What he meant by this phrase was that "nowhere does [language] stop and leave a place for pure sense" (2007b, 244). There is no direct presentation of sense in language, pure or otherwise, because the sense of signs is always absent where they are present. It is absent from the sign inasmuch as when we are looking for the sense of signs we must go elsewhere, whether it be to their syntax or context, or the background system, or usages out of which they arise as meaningful signs. It follows that if by 'idea' such a 'pure sense' as Merleau-Ponty spoke of is meant, then text cannot be its repository. Indeed, much and possibly the preponderance of Conceptual art that takes textual form plays with the ambiguity of language as well as its materiality, the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers being surely the ironic master in this respect. Weiner's use of language too seems to revel in the medium's suggestive vagueness and its opacity. So, rather than loading the identity of the work into the linguistically expressed idea, his 'Statement of Intent' could also simply, and equally well, be read as putting all degrees and variety of realisation on an equal footing. When Long subsequently says that "knowledge of my actions, in whatever form, is the art" he is, consciously or not, echoing this alternate reading of Weiner (Long 2007, 26).

At this point, it is worth recalling that for Merleau-Ponty an object, or rather a phenomenon, is not at all a definite thing but, rather, is inherently ambiguous. In this respect at least, language and phenomena are not ultimately distinct. Both are characterised by a comparable incompleteness. From Merleau-Ponty's point of view then it is possible to say that Weiner is not wrong when, in conversation with Siegelau and the other artists in latter's *January Show*, he refers to the infinity of language (Lippard 1977, 132). A sign, a word, is incomplete in itself and cannot, therefore, "be conceived of as a positive entity" (Barbaras 2004, 52), because it is a compound of presence and absence. The meaning of each present word is established against a background of language that is absent; it is this background that constitutes the word as meaningful, though it be as intangible itself as the material word is demonstrably present. "The sign," as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "makes sense only insofar as it is profiled against other signs," and its sense exists only in the form of a horizon toward which the sign tends (2007b, 244). Although the sense of the sign does not emanate from within it – although, that is to say, its sense is not immanent to it – a sign's sense is nonetheless intrinsic to its identity as sign. As well as alluding to something very close to this in his reference to language's infinity where "there is no edge," Weiner also contrasts it, however, to the material discreteness of objects, his examples being paintings and picture frames (Lippard 1977, 131). Undoubtedly, there is a distinction to be made between words and things, between the word 'painting' and a particular painting by Cézanne, say. In terms of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective, however, it is not a distinction between something infinite and immaterial on the one hand and a finite and material positivity on the other, as Weiner seems to imply. The compound of presence and absence found in the sign is also to be found in the phenomenon.

In the *The Visible and the Invisible* perception is no longer presented, if it ever was in Merleau-Ponty's earlier work, as the intending of a unified noema. Rather, each apparently discrete perception is seen as being actually "a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 132). Merleau-Ponty takes as an example a direct

perception of redness, which turns out to be constituted of a network of other potential reds and red things. The directness of the perception, therefore, becomes at the least complicated by its implication with potential perceptions: it is not “a quale, a pellicle of being without thickness” but, rather, “emerges from a less precise, more general redness” (1968, 131). Each discrete perception Merleau-Ponty thinks of as having this halo of sense, a virtual linkage with other potential perceptions, hence, “this red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation” (1968, 132). Without this absent horizon, the present perception would not be what it is. It would indeed not *be* at all: each perception is ‘animated’ by a sense (it is *red*, a *tree*, and so on); it has an aspect, and without this it would not even be perception, let alone this particular perception. So, in Merleau-Ponty’s later thought language loses its claim to the ideal transparency and phenomena theirs to unalloyed presence. At this point phenomenology as it was understood in the context of Minimalism has been surpassed.

Let us get back to Weiner. It was necessary to point out that his statements *are* objects despite their textual form and, also, to add that equally as words they are *not* objects, if by that are meant literal, material presences. Now, we can go a further step and say that material objects themselves in their meaningful appearance are also more than merely present objects. Even as objects given to vision, their meaningful appearance is reliant on a sense that is not present in them or finite. (In the case of art objects, this absent horizon of sense is more salient than in everyday perception as the background they come into being against is necessarily historical.) On this ontological level, the level of sense, Weiner’s statements would indeed be the ‘same’ as their materially realised counterparts. While his text works derive much of their effect from their referential ambiguity, and despite this being undoubtedly distinct (in ways I will not elaborate on here) from the perceptual ambiguity one experiences when encountering sculptures such as those of Serra or Heizer, both text and object produce an experience neither clear nor obscure, neither fully present and immediate nor entirely general and abstract. Perceptual and linguistic horizons are different, but the compound of presence and absence remains on an ontological level. One thing that perhaps could be said in this context about their difference is that Weiner’s works are not synonymous with their medium in the way that Minimalist objects seem to be. This notwithstanding, is it not possible to think about Weiner’s work, or that of other Conceptual and Post-conceptual artists, in this revised phenomenological framework? If so, it will be because it is significantly distinct from that of classical phenomenology. It will no longer be focused on the constitution of the world in the intentional acts of consciousness, even if the job of constitution, as with the earlier Merleau-Ponty taken up by the likes of Morris and Krauss, migrates to the body’s intentional grasp of the world.

One of phenomenology’s most significant discoveries, it is often said, was that made by Edmund Husserl of the transcendental nature of intentionality. That is to say, the noema (or sense) is not of the same order as the thing that appears in it (the sensed). The bracketing of the latter allowed the former to be shown as the form of its appearance. This is the result of the Husserlian reduction: to split the intending from the intended. However, Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy, Barbaras tells us, “proceeds entirely from the decision to reconceive intentionality as an originary ‘reality’, to recognise the irreducible and in some way unrendable character of the intentional fabric” (2004, 170). Rather than sense, therefore, being conceived as being entirely on the side of consciousness, giving form and identity to the inert intended thing, in the late Merleau-Ponty it is thought of as being

woven with the sensible (Barbaras 2004, 163). The nature of this intertwining of sense and the sensible, however, is that sense is presented in the sensible as “a certain absence”: “the sense of sense lies in never being present in person,” Barbaras writes (163; 52). As we have seen, sense is thus a horizon that must remain elusive and absent so as to be itself, just as the phenomenon must continue to unfold towards its absent horizons so that it can be what it is. In sum then, sense as horizon, as Merleau-Ponty thinks it, is what both enables the phenomenon to appear and keeps its appearing from completing itself, whereas in Husserl, on the contrary, the noema is conceived as a “unity of sense” (Barbaras 2004, 51; 171). In the picture supplied by late Merleau-Ponty the world’s sense is not forged in the crucible of the intending subject, nor in the body’s intentional grasp; if intentionality is able to give sense, it is because it has already received it.

In *Discourse, Figure*, which contains his most extensive reckoning with Merleau-Ponty’s thought, Lyotard spoke at one point of walking “the same path as Merleau-Ponty, but in the opposite direction” (2011, 54). That is to say, rather than attempting to show that language can be related to the thickness of the phenomenal world beyond it, Lyotard meant to show in his book how phenomenal distance (“the beyond-Logos”) already inhabits language undermining its transparency. It should be clear by now that, even if not explicit in Merleau-Ponty’s late work, such an approach does not seem to be entirely at odds with the ontology it puts forward and the analyses it contains. Lyotard also clearly had sympathy for phenomenology’s aim of going “beneath the realist view of the constituted or the given” and in particular Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to do so, even if he believed that “sooner or later one will have to give up phenomenologizing if one wants to reach ... this something that is not constitutable.” In place of phenomenology, it was what he termed “deconstruction” that was needed (Lyotard 2011, 54–5). Perhaps what makes it possible to say that Merleau-Ponty is still doing phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible* and related texts is not only that he is *not* performing a deconstruction of conceptual oppositions as Lyotard does, but that he seeks to reappraise and refashion such phenomenological concepts as intentionality. In his late essay on Husserl, “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” he speculates on how the ontological approach he is now taking to “unveil the pretheoretical layer,” which he likens to an “archaeology,” might transform phenomenology’s core concepts: “Does it make no changes at all in our conception of noesis, noema, and intentionality – in our ontology? After we have made this descent, are we still entitled to seek in an analytics of acts what upholds our own and the world’s life without appeal?” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 165). This is, indeed, a big change from Husserl and his own *Phenomenology*, where intentionality is by and large explored as a subjective act.

As we have seen, in his late work Merleau-Ponty has moved on from thinking of intentionality as being explicable finally as the subject’s grasp of the world. It is certain that he no longer thought of the world as primarily constituted in our intentional acts, as these themselves had a background, the soil of the lifeworld, that was “not constitutable” in them. Ultimately, going back to follow up the ramifications of these two simply stated conceptual developments, largely missed in Merleau-Ponty’s reception within Minimal and denigration in Conceptual art theory, is what is required to re-establish phenomenology’s relevance for Post-conceptual art. Merleau-Ponty spoke of the need to renounce “the bifurcation of the ‘consciousness of’ and the object,” which the Husserlian concept of intentionality implies (1968, 141). What he refers to as the ‘consciousness of’ here is intentionality conceived of as immanent to the subject and founded on an ideal “unity of

sense” independent of any actual object. So might we not, if we were to take up again and elaborate upon Merleau-Ponty’s alternative version of intentionality and its rejection of an immanent, unified sense, be walking in the same direction as Smithson and his rejection of “facile” ideas of “gestalt unity” in the ontology of the work of art, too?

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